# 天地無用！魎皇鬼

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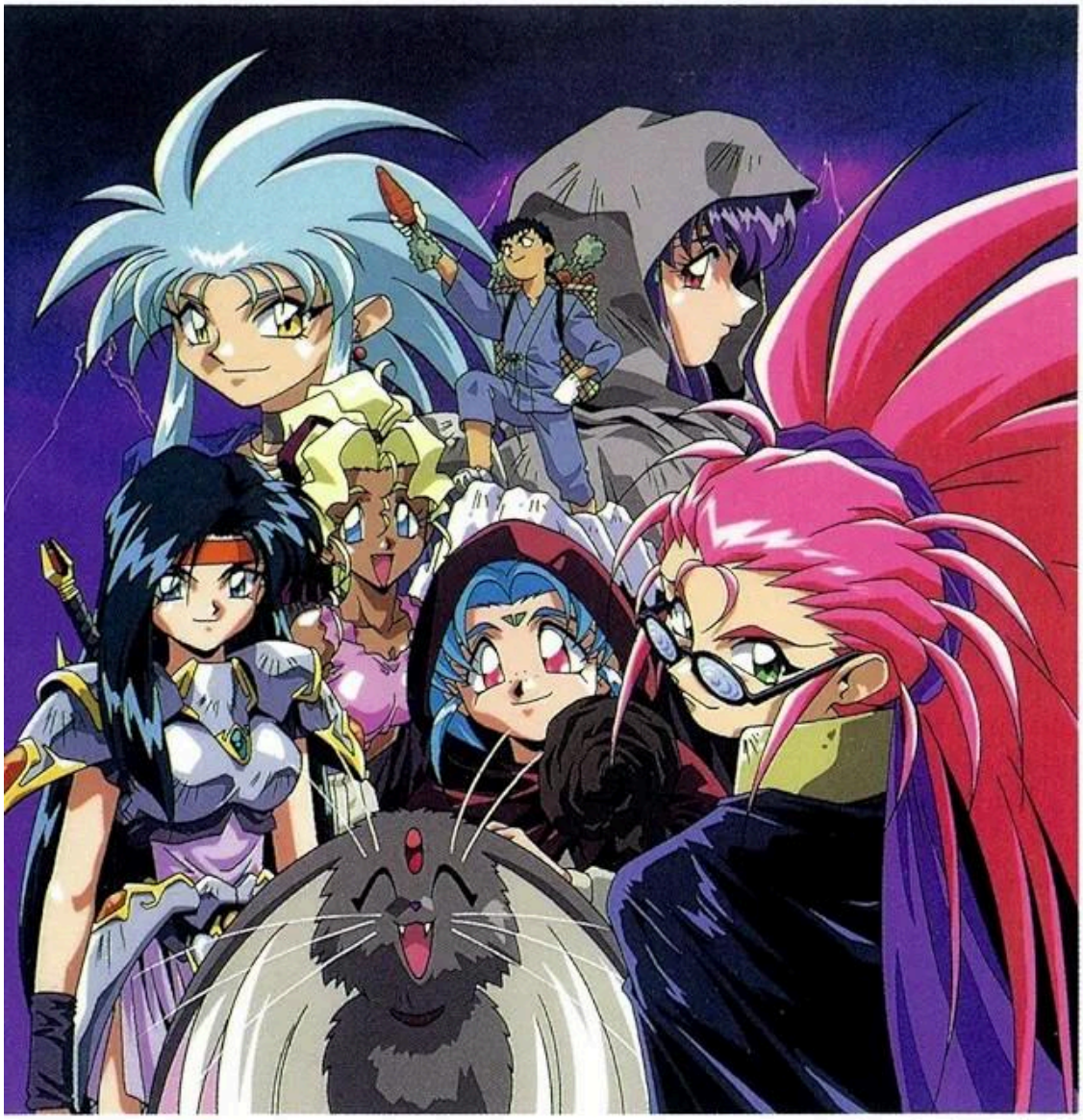

イラスト　大和田直之

富士見ファンタジア文庫

# Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-Ohki

**The Champion of Chaos**

**By Naoko Hasegawa**

Novel 6

(Published 5th)

Machine Translated and Edited by Eff_Efferson

(April 2026)

For more: visit tenchimuyotranslationblog.blogspot.com

# Opening:

# Twilight Falls on the Wasteland——

Twilight falls on the wasteland——.

Wind races past Tenchi's side, crying low, crying high.

Battered and covered in wounds, Tenchi gripped his sword and fixed his gaze on the small figure of his enemy.

Yes—it was a woman.

And an exceptionally beautiful girl, at that.

Black hair trimmed straight across above the eyebrows. A fleeting, delicate gaze.

But Tenchi knew.

She was a far more dangerous opponent than her appearance suggested.

Already thrown, kicked down, and stomped on multiple times, Tenchi thought bitterly.

The slender sword in the girl's hand gleamed wet in the evening sun, as if soaked in blood.

If he couldn't use his secret blade technique here, there was no more chance of victory.

His stamina was already at its limit.

At that moment, the girl casually stepped forward.

Now!

Tenchi raised his sword high and charged.

He brought it down with all his strength.

And then the girl's figure vanished.

Before he even had time to think, a flying kick caught him and Tenchi staggered involuntarily.

A high, fast kick—the force of it was impossible to believe from a girl.

Damn!

As he tried to recover his stance, his leg was swept out from under him.
A sharp kiai cry—"Ha!"—struck his ears.
The girl, mounted on Tenchi's chest, raised her sword high.
"W-wait! Time out! Time out!"
"No mercy!!"
Blood misted upward like fog.
"Nature's punishment!" the girl cried in triumph—and then another voice, shameless and blunt, overlapped with hers.
"You're terrible——"

It was a rainy Thursday afternoon.
Tenchi threw down the controller and looked at Ryoko resentfully.
"I told you, I'm not good at this kind of thing."
"Pathetic."
Ryoko sighed.
"You're a Light Hawk Sword wielder, aren't you? How many years have you been training? Couldn't you at least gauge the distance or put up a proper defense? Letting yourself get kicked down again and again—you've got no shame."
Tenchi felt stung.
"I haven't trained my fingertip reflexes."
"That's right, Lord Tenchi doesn't have spare time like you."
Ayeka cut in boldly.
"Lord Tenchi! I will avenge you. Ryoko, you've gone too far! I was the one who defeated your enemy."
She snatched the controller and fixed Ryoko with a sharp look.
"Let us settle this with a proper match!!"
"Go, Big Sis!"
"Do your best, Ryoko!"
Enthusiastic cheers rose from the gallery.
Tenchi slowly backed away and climbed up onto the sofa in the outer seats.
On the screen, the beautiful girl and the armored beauty were exchanging blows in a fraction-of-a-second rapid-fire exchange.
"Haaa....."
A sigh escaped him before he knew it.
"Even though you're all aliens—how can everyone be so good at this!?"

Tenchi muttered, watching the colorful backs of the girls gathered in front of the TV—the four who had long since stopped being lodgers at the Masaki house and had become its true rulers.

The two facing off were, as everyone knew, ex-space pirate Ryoko and First Princess of the Jurai Royal Family, Ayeka.

Cheering them on from behind were Ayeka's younger sister Sasami and Galaxy Police first-class detective Mihoshi.

Mihoshi's partner Kiyone had gone out for her part-time job and wasn't there.

"Lord Tenchi, did you get beaten again?"

Genius scientist Washu turned around, smirking.

"No, Washu-san—this is only the first match of today."

Tenchi gave an answer that lacked all persuasiveness.

"If I calculate your win rate from all your matches so far..."

Washu tapped the keyboard that floated in the air.

"Your win rate is 0.01%. That's in the realm of miracles or pure luck."

Declared flatly by a genius scientist, Tenchi had nothing to say.

"Well, I'm not saying you're weak. You're human, after all. It's unavoidable to lose to Ryoko's kinetic vision, which I, the genius Washu-chan, created."

"Is that how it works?"

"That's how it works. Don't worry about it."

"But I can't win against Ayeka-san, Sasami-chan, or Mihoshi-san either."

"...I didn't know that. Would you like a power-up for your reflexes and kinetic vision?"

Washu leaned forward with a pleased expression.

"If you leave it to Washu-chan, a simple surgery could dramatically improve your athletic ability..."

"N-no, it's fine."

Tenchi hurriedly waved his hand.

When Washu became unusually helpful or looked pleased, nothing good ever came of it.

He wasn't going to have a "simple surgery" that gave him the ability to walk through walls or run faster than a bullet train.

"I'm perfectly satisfied as I am, now. It's just..."

"Just?"

Washu leaned forward again.

"If I could become as strong as a game character, that would be kind of nice."

Washu watched Tenchi for a full minute as he flipped through a game magazine with

his head bowed.

The universe's greatest insight effortlessly pierced through Tenchi's head and came back after bouncing off the pot in the kitchen.

"Oho."

Tenchi startled and looked up.

"What do you mean, 'oho'?"

"No need to hold back, Lord Tenchi. I, genius Washu-chan, will take care of it."

"I—"

Tenchi dropped the magazine.

"I never asked for anything!"

"It's written all over your face that you want to be stronger."

"My face!?"

"You want to be respected as a man. Even if not respected, at least to receive a proper, fair evaluation. And on top of that, not to be treated like a pillow-fight pillow."

Since Tenchi said nothing, Washu added more.

"Or maybe more of a football? Of course, since the value of a football lies in people fighting over it, no matter how much the ball says 'I hate this, please leave me alone,' there's nothing to be done."

While waiting for Tenchi's retort, Washu thought of yet another metaphor.

"If the ball comparison is too much, what about wall-tennis? The player discovers their own weaknesses through the unmoving wall and sharpens their skills. Of course, boxing has its sandbag, and sumo has its training post. Lord Tenchi, you are the wall and the post of this Masaki household. Have more confidence, would you?"

Tenchi held his head in his hands.

"Why don't you just say 'sandbag'?"

"Even I, as brilliant as I am, feel a bit uncomfortable saying that."

Washu shot back.

"I'm fine being the decorative piece at the entrance."

"The problem is..."

Washu ignored Tenchi's wish and dropped her voice as if getting to the crux of the matter.

"A wall or a sandbag or a post or a football doesn't level up. You clearly need to level up. For that, you first have to become a player. How about it? Are you motivated?"

"M-motivated for what?"

Tenchi was already looking for a way to back out, but he stopped himself just short of rising from his seat.

True, relying entirely on others wasn't good.

But if it was just about training hard enough to win at games...

"Don't worry. Leave body and soul to Washu-chan. I'll make you a man as strong as a post, as unshakeable as a wall."

And then, at that moment.

"I did it!"

A victory cry rose up.

"I avenged you, Lord Tenchi! Look, look—I did it!"

On the screen, the armored beauty was in the process of casting a single rose from her rapier hand.

"Tenchi!"

Ryoko let out a pitiful wail.

"Ayeka's bullying me~~ She totally played dirty and caught me in a combo. Tenchi, say something. Tenchi!"

Ryoko tossed the controller aside, rushed to Tenchi, and broke down sobbing dramatically.

"Ryoko? Stop it, stop clinging."

"Neee~n, Tenchi!"

It was obvious she couldn't care less about losing.

Ayeka, who had picked up on Ryoko's fake crying, came over with a changed expression.

"Hey! Get away from Lord Tenchi! You lost, and now you're being cowardly. I was the one who avenged him. Lord Tenchi, please say something."

Ayeka tugged on his sleeve from the other side.

"Ayeka-san, I didn't really..."

"Yeah, that's right—nobody asked you and it was none of your business. Ayeka, don't you dare drag MY Tenchi around."

"You're the one who should let go—stop sticking to him like duct tape!"

"A-Ayeka-san. Ryoko..."

Pulled alternately by two women, Tenchi finally let out a tearful cry.

"Stop it! My clothes—my clothes are coming off..."

Washu calmly moved to the side, away from the center of the commotion, and murmured in a composed voice.

"Endure it, Lord Tenchi. Even if you're a sandbag now, something good is sure to come of it. Trust Washu-chan."

Meanwhile, Sasami and Mihoshi had cheerfully started another game together.

"Oh, right there, right there. Sasami-chan, please!"

"Leave it to me! Yeah, I did it!"

"Amazing! Sasami-chan, you're a game genius!"

"Mihoshi-san is also pretty good!"

On the screen, two monkeys who had cleared the stage were happily tossing their hats in the air.

# Level 1:

# The Three Days That Followed

The three days that followed passed without incident.

Washu retreated into her lab with game software and strategy guides to do research, Tenchi was busy with the farm work, and the promise made on that Thursday afternoon seemed all but forgotten.

It was Sunday morning.

"Lord Tenchi! Where is Lord Tenchi?"

Washu appeared in the living room with an unusually loud voice.

"Washu-san?"

"What happened?"

Ayeka and Mihoshi, who had been holding controllers and stacking up jellybean-colored monsters, turned around.

"It's finished! The ultimate program, named 'The Final Seven Days'!"

"The final what?"

Ryoko, who had been lying on the beam, pricked up her ears and came down.

"What is it?"

Sasami popped her head out from the kitchen.

"You people..."

Washu looked over the cluster of idle people who had gathered around her and furrowed her brow.

"Don't you have anything better to do than stick your noses into other people's conversations? I'm looking for Lord Tenchi. Or are you making Lord Tenchi do all the work while you play around?"

"I'm right here."

Tenchi appeared from the kitchen with a dishcloth in his hand.

"Sorry, I was a bit busy..."

"See? Just as I thought."

Washu glanced around at the idle ones.
"Lord Tenchi is not your slave."
"It's fine, Washu-san. It's my turn to do chores today."
Tenchi gave a weak smile and tried to return to the kitchen.
"Just wait a moment!"
Washu snapped her fingers and a door leading to the lab appeared.
"You, come this way. Don't you want to see what I promised you?"
"You promised me something?"
Tenchi looked puzzled.
"Goodness, did you already forget? It's a program made exclusively for Lord Tenchi. A hero-training program. One that balances and raises intellect, physical ability, and skills over one week, and by saving the world, instills the one thing a man most needs: self-confidence. The ultimate educational software. I, genius Washu-chan—"
Washu unconsciously clenched her fist into a victory pose.
"—made it just for you. The greatest project ever. Lord Tenchi, I will surely make a man of you!"
"What——!?"
"My, that sounds so... indecent..."
By the time anyone noticed, Ryoko and Ayeka—who could lick their lips in anticipation—were pressed close to Washu on both sides, waiting for the story to continue.
"Indecent—hey, you two!"
Washu shooed them away like dogs.
"I didn't tell you to come. Lord Tenchi's business is none of your concern. Lord Tenchi, this way!"
"Y-yes."
Tenchi hurriedly followed Washu into the lab.
The cluster of idle people filed in after them.
"What is this... the ultimate program?"
In the middle of the lab sat a crystal ball about the size of an armful.
Around its pedestal, cables writhed and connected to three organic computers.
The crystal ball rotated slowly, radiating its own light.
Its interior sparkled like a kaleidoscope.
When Tenchi peered in, he could see something like polygonal prisms rotating slowly.
"That itself is just a container. Or more of a field, really. The crystal-like surface you see is a protection that blocks influence from the real world. Hey, you over

there—don't touch those switches or keys!"

That last line was directed at Ryoko and the others.

"I called it the 'ultimate program,' but really it's just a mix of existing software with a bit of my own seasoning—an instant simulation. It's set up in RPG format, but I'd say it's at least rich in atmosphere."

"Um, Washu-san..."

Tenchi withdrew his outstretched hand and eyed the crystal ball suspiciously.

"Am I going inside this?"

"That's right. Well, 'going inside' isn't quite accurate—'transferring' would be more fitting. It's not a bathtub."

"What happens when I'm transferred?"

"I'll give you a proper lecture. And don't touch that!"

Mihoshi, who had been gazing in fascination at the sparkling crystal, was timidly reaching out a finger. Washu raised an eyebrow.

"That's exactly why I didn't want to show it to you. Okay, that's enough—out, everyone, out!"

Washu herded the onlookers out of the lab, pushed Tenchi along, and closed the door behind her with her back to it.

The instant she did, the door vanished as if it had never been there.

"Now then. I'm borrowing Lord Tenchi for a bit."

Washu dragged Tenchi to the dining table in the kitchen and sat him in a chair, taking a seat across from him.

"There's nothing to worry about. The adventure is exactly one week. Starting from the Field of Departure, ending at the Demon King's palace. Of course, 'one week' means in game time, so you should be back by tomorrow morning. Just do what you would in a normal RPG. Travel around towns, gather information, move on to the next town—like that. Restore HP at inns or use herbs. The fine details should all become clear in the first town. And you over there—if you're eavesdropping like that, I'll charge you tuition!"

"Heh heh heh..."

Sasami appeared with Ryo-ohki on her head. "That's so cool, Tenchi-niichan. Sasami wants to go too!"

"You two loiterers!"

Ryoko and Ayeka reluctantly poked their faces in.

"If you're going to stand around, at least make some tea."

Tea was brought, and nori rice crackers were piled high, and Washu resumed her lecture.

"The important thing is that when you arrive over there, your memories will be reset. Of course, they don't actually disappear—they're just temporarily sealed off. If you're always remembering things from the Masaki house and worrying about whether the carrots are okay, it won't feel like an adventure. Well, in literary terms, Lord Tenchi will live another life in the span of a day and night. Do whatever you like. There might be a bonus at the inn."

"What does that mean!?"

Ayeka, whose instincts on such matters were as sharp as a detective agency's, promptly latched on.

"It's a joke, a joke."

Washu gave a sly smile.

"You all want Lord Tenchi to get stronger, right? Love and battle are what make a man grow. Just being bossed around by you lot or plowing carrot fields isn't going to make anyone grow. It's not only you who spend your days immersed in love and battle. Well, if Lord Tenchi is fine with that, it's another story."

"I..."

Tenchi muttered with a conflicted expression.

"It sounds like I'm being made fun of..."

"Not at all! Do you think I'd spend three days making a program out of pure whim? I, for one, couldn't just stand by and watch Lord Tenchi any longer..."

"There it is."

Tenchi sighed.

"My life is already full of love and battle every day, even without going to another world. But this does sound a little interesting, so I think I'll go."

"Wonderful!"

Washu beamed.

"That's what it means to be a man. All right, please press the start button."

Washu produced a keyboard from subspace as usual.

"I don't need to take anything?"

"No. Or rather, you can't take anything. By the way, where is Mihoshi-dono?"

"Hm?"

Tenchi looked around the kitchen, and Ayeka and Ryoko exchanged glances.

"She's not here either."

Sasami looked around the living room and shook her head.

"Oh well. Let's start the button—"

That's when it happened.

Everyone present was struck by an eerie sensation.

It was as if space were being vacuumed away by force, as if a dimensional button had been torn off... I'd like the reader to exercise their maximum imagination on Lord Tenchi's behalf... a completely unreasonable sensation washed over them.

"Lord Tenchi, wait! This is—"

Washu, apparently realizing the cause of the anomaly, cried out.

"I already pressed it!"

Tenchi shouted back in a voice on the verge of tears.

At that very same moment, Mihoshi—left alone for some reason in the lab—was letting out a tremendous scream in front of the crystal ball.

"No way... I just wanted to see more of what was inside..."

The transparent membrane covering the surface of the crystal ball had burst and scattered, and black spots like small stains appeared around the seven prisms.

The spots grew at an accelerating rate, like mold growing in fast motion, and began to invade the interior.

"Washu-saaan! What do I do with this!? Ugh, I'm just going to press everything!"

Tears welling in her eyes, Mihoshi began pressing every switch within reach, and the unmanned lab was filled with an ominous hum.

Here and there, if not quite explosions, sparks occurred, and unknown worlds appeared on the displays.

"What is this...? Which switch do I turn off!?"

The grass field on the display expanded rapidly and pressed in on Mihoshi.

"Stop! Hey, stop! I'll shoot you!"

Mihoshi aimed her blaster through her tears, but of course the expansion didn't stop.

"Aah, no! Kiyone, help!"

Mihoshi desperately started turning off the switches she'd just pressed.

And then suddenly her body floated up.

"Wait—I haven't turned them all off yet..."

With a whoosh, Mihoshi's figure vanished.

And simultaneously, the figures of Tenchi, Ryoko, Ayeka, and Sasami disappeared from the Masaki kitchen.

"Someone pressed an extra switch..."

A moment later, Washu's figure disappeared.

The Masaki kitchen became deserted—like an evaporation incident, half-drunk tea

and rice crackers remained on the table, and in the unmanned lab, the warning light flashed on the console where the sparks had died down.

The sub-display blinked a message in the common language, complete with a question mark in the common tongue.

Hello, Washu-chan. The protection has been released. If you wish to re-protect, press the all-clear key. Okay?

That was the content of the displayed message.

Kiyone stared blankly at the screaming, chaotic bargain-sale floor, clutching the one-piece dress she'd marked as her target.

It was a floral-print, long-length one-piece she'd always passed with a sigh on her way home from her part-time job.

Why was Kiyone, who had no such dress, heading out to buy such a mismatched item? Because a female college student at her part-time job had said:

"Kiyone-san, you always wear jeans or leggings. Don't you have any skirts?"

Kiyone, who had not a single long skirt and was also honest, could not immediately reply.

"T-that's not true..."

"Really!? Wear one next time!"

"Uh... but they're hard to move in..."

"Oh come on, you really don't have any, do you?"

"U... no..."

"Come on, remember that girl who got fired for coming in with you? Mihoshi, I think? She had quite cute clothes, didn't she?"

(Gulp!? Earth girls really pay attention, don't they!?)

"I want to see you in a skirt just once, no matter what. If you don't have one, go borrow one. Or I could lend you mine."

"I... it's fine. I'll wear one next time."

"Good luck, see you later. Oh, right—that one-piece you're always staring at is going on sale this Sunday."

"What!?"

"Honestly, you have no social life. The sale starts at ten. Don't be late!"

"Uh, sure..."

"Life's not much fun if you're always so serious. I want to hear about your life too, Kiyone-san."

And so Kiyone found herself at the sale of a famous brand on the first floor of a

fashion building. She was experiencing culture shock at the overwhelming passion young Earth women poured into clothing.

"Hey hey, between these, these, these, and these—which is best?"

A college student much younger than Kiyone came over carrying a mountain of spoils.

"I always get confused by myself!"

The college student's eyes sparkled as she began scrutinizing her clothes in earnest.

"Kiyone-san, why not try that one-piece on? You don't need any of the others? You seem a bit off today—do you have some other business?"

"N-no."

"Liar. You always go straight home, so you've got a boyfriend you're living with, right? Speaking of which, you never talk about your home life. What's your boyfriend like? Who does he look like?"

"Listen..."

Kiyone, exhausted from the machine-gun questioning, racked her brain for how to escape this situation.

This girl's observational skills are on par with a first-class detective. Earth girls shouldn't be underestimated.

"My house is a shrine. So I have duties and various things to attend to..."

Since she couldn't say she was a Galaxy Police detective, Kiyone mixed in just a touch of fiction.

"What!? A shrine? Which shrine? I'll come visit sometime. Do I get a discount on amulets?"

"Oh, the fitting room is free now."

The college student turned away.

And at that moment.

A bizarre sucking force—something like gwaooooo—seized Kiyone.

"Wh-what!?"

---

Only Kiyone seemed to feel it.

"Wait a moment, I haven't paid for this yet..."

When the college student turned around near the fitting room, Kiyone's figure was nowhere to be found.

"Kiyone-san? Where did she go?"

The college student didn't think too hard about it and closed the curtain, and within the next ten minutes had forgotten all about Kiyone and her available funds.

"Money... I'm going to be a shoplifter!?"

Kiyone's voice was swallowed into the information space of the transfer and no longer reached anywhere on this Earth.

# Level 2:

# "...Where Am I? Who's There!?"

"...Where am I? Who's there!?"

Clutching the floral-print one-piece, Kiyone murmured in a daze.

As far as the eye could see: grassland.

And Kiyone was standing in the middle of that grassland, in grass about knee-high.

She was wearing what she'd had on when she went out—a white sweatshirt and black leggings.

The blue sky held white clouds, which were being driven rapidly along by strong winds high above.

Each time the drifting clouds blocked the sunlight that was illuminating the grassland, a shadow would sweep through.

"...Where is this!?"

The wind blew, and the grassland undulated like a wave.

From the look of the grass and so on, it appeared to be somewhere on Earth.

Kiyone, not knowing what was going on, gripped her handbag strap tightly and looked all around her.

Behind Kiyone—right where she'd turned—was a brand-new signpost.

《Field of Departure》

Written in Japanese, in printed text.

Kiyone walked up to the signpost about five meters away and read it again.

There was nothing particularly unusual about it as a signpost.

Except for the question of why such a thing was here, and the fact that the signpost was standing perfectly straight with nothing supporting it.

Kiyone deliberately walked around and looked at the back of the signpost, and it had a back.

So, At least it had a front and back.

"I... Am I having a bad dream? Or maybe I've gone crazy."

Kiyone looked down at the one-piece in her hand.

She clearly remembered the situation when she'd grabbed it, and the face of the college student who'd gone with her.

More than that—she clearly remembered the words she'd cried out when the uncanny sucking sensation had rushed at her.

And yes—this one-piece was still going to be stolen goods.

"You've got to be kidding!?"

Kiyone shouted without thinking.

For Kiyone Makibi—first-class detective of the Galaxy Police, no less—to be a thief.

"No, there's nothing wrong with me. It's this place that's wrong!"

She declared it out loud, but of course nothing could be done about it.

Kiyone started working her elite, logical mind—to try to grasp this abnormal situation even a little—and leaned against the signpost and began to think.

I don't think going to the sale was the cause. If it were a spacial warp or something, the college student would have been swept away with me too. The fact that this happened only to me means it's more natural to think someone targeted me intentionally.

That someone naturally knows me and also has the power to transport a targeted person to a different place.

And the reason...?

Kiyone was getting angrier and angrier at the sheer incomprehensibility of it all.

Sure, I'm a first-class detective, so it's possible I've been targeted out of grudge from past investigations. But I can't think of anyone capable of pulling off something this elaborate.

I know a few criminals with spatial transfer abilities, but to transfer someone without even touching them, just like that.

Not even Ryoko-san could do such a thing.

Then who on earth!?

Kiyone got up and stared hard at the signpost again.

"The Field of Departure, hm..."

Since she unfortunately had no interest in games, she was a complete novice when it came to RPG clichés.

Kiyone tilted her head and surveyed the grassland with no clues to offer.

"If I depart, will I find something out?"
She was getting embarrassed talking to herself, so Kiyone decided to just start walking.
And then, suddenly, music began to play.
A brave, slightly melancholy melody—fitting for a departure.
It was impossible to tell where it was coming from.
While Kiyone was looking around in surprise, the rousing music played one long phrase three times over, then disappeared without a trace.
"What—what is that? What IS that!?"

Kiyone was frightened, and searched inside her handbag.
Something that could be a weapon—that thought came to her reflexively.
There was no blaster in a handbag taken to a bargain sale, and the only thing that might serve as even a remote weapon was a compact mirror.
"...Honestly!"
Kiyone fastened the clasp of her handbag and wrapped the inconvenient one-piece around her waist.
The one-piece would get wrinkled, but it was better than having one hand occupied.
With her brow furrowed, Kiyone started walking.
She was determined to unravel this world and get home, no matter what.
The sun at its zenith showed no sign of moving lower.
Growing hot, Kiyone rolled up her sweatshirt sleeves, stopped, and wiped her sweat.
Just as she was about to start walking again.
Kiyone's sneaker stepped on something soft.
"Yikes!?"
Praying it wasn't animal droppings, she nervously looked down at her feet.
There, quivering, was a transparent, blue-colored, pumpkin-sized gelatinous creature.
"What is this!?"
Kiyone kicked it aside in disgust.
At that instant, the jelly sprang high into the air and launched itself straight at Kiyone's face!
"Kyaaaa!"
She reflexively struck it away with a hand chop, then quickly changed direction.
In an instant, a second attacker came at her.
"Ha!"

A roundhouse kick connected.

She struck down the third and fourth with hand chops, then stayed on guard, scanning her surroundings tensely.

The jelly—or rather, the monster—she'd knocked down fell to the ground and vanished like smoke, never attacking again.

Kiyone sighed and relaxed her stance.

"There are monsters! Why didn't anyone warn me!?"

There was no answer to that outburst in the middle of the grassland, of course.

Kiyone glared at the grass with resentful indignation, then took a bandana from her handbag and tied it smartly across her forehead.

"If that's how you want it, I'm prepared too! Not going to let you get the drop on me again!!"

"Pff..."

A voice that seemed to burst with laughter came from the grass a short distance away.

"What a goofball traveler. No idea who you are, but this Claire-chan is going to give you a nice ambush."

A young female thief, wearing a green shirt with a leather jerkin, mini-shorts, and lace-up sandals, slipped her ponytail below the grass line with utmost care and began slowly tailing Kiyone.

Kiyone, still furious, was slashing through the grass as she walked, when she thought she caught a glimpse of something to her left and stopped.

"My imagination..."

She was sure she'd just seen a yellow ribbon.

As Kiyone started walking, a yellow butterfly began fluttering and dancing in the grass to her left.

"Hmm."

Kiyone glanced sideways at the butterfly and deliberately slowed down.

The butterfly stopped when Kiyone stopped, and followed at the same speed when she started walking.

"How dim-witted. Whoever this is, she thinks she's hiding."

Kiyone stopped and conspicuously stretched.

"Ahh. I think I'll rest for a bit..." she said in a voice loud enough to be heard, and casually turned her back.

From behind her came the faint sound of grass rustling.

One... two... three!

She dodged the thrust short sword by a hair's breadth and slammed a hand chop into the bandit's wrist.

"Oooow!"

"Hey! What exactly do you think you're doing!?"

Kiyone swiftly kicked the short sword away.

"Ohh, I failed again."

The bandit muttered and turned around.

A knife gleamed in her hand.

"Um, sooo, if you value your life, leave all your money here!"

"Mihoshi!?"

Kiyone instinctively stepped forward.

"Mihoshi!! It's Mihoshi, isn't it! What are you doing here!?"

"What!?"

Now it was the bandit's turn to be startled, stumbling backward.

"Who are you? Who's Mihoshi?"

The traveler and the bandit—or more precisely, Kiyone and the memory-sealed Mihoshi—stared at each other in silence for a moment.

"Um. My name is Claire."

The person calling herself Claire quietly put away her knife, glancing ruefully at the kicked-away short sword.

"Could I have that back? Without it, I'm out of business."

"...Mihoshi—no, Claire-san? What exactly is your line of work?"

"Oh, it's not that much of a job..."

Mihoshi, a.k.a Claire, inched sideways while keeping an eye on Kiyone.

"My dad's a thief and my mom's a thief too, so they told me I had to absolutely become a thief... So I kind of ended up... But I feel like I might not really be suited for this. After all, in three months of being a thief, I haven't succeeded even once. My great-grandfather, who was a great bandit, absolutely says I'll be fine, but..."

"Hold on—'thief' means bandit!?"

Kiyone shook Mihoshi's shoulders without thinking.

"What are you saying!? Mihoshi's grandfather is the long-serving director of the renowned Galaxy Police! And you are Mihoshi Kuramitsu, a first-class Galaxy Police detective. What on earth would bring you to tears as a thief..."

Kiyone blinked.

This is too much!!

She screamed internally.

To think that the dim-witted bandit I thought was a complete amateur turned out to be Mihoshi of all people!

"Get a grip, Mihoshi! Did you forget your partner's face? I'm Kiyone Makibi, your fellow detective!"

"Kiyo-ne...?"

Mihoshi, alias Claire, furrowed her brow in puzzlement.

"Kiyone, kiyone... Kiyone-chan!?"

"Not 'chan'!!"

Kiyone embraced Mihoshi out of sheer joy.

"Did you remember properly?"

"I swear by the god of the Galaxy Police!"

MihoKiyo clasped their hands together and burst out laughing.

"But why was I doing bandit work?"

The memory-restored Mihoshi looked down at her clothes.

"Eww... was I walking around in this get-up?"

"You were crawling around. With a yellow ribbon flapping."

Kiyone laughed and patted Mihoshi's shoulder.

"What a strange bandit you made—never once succeeded. On top of that, the first thing you said was, 'Sooo, if you value your life...'"

"You didn't have to say that much..."

Mihoshi glared sideways at the loudly laughing Kiyone.

"If you're going to laugh like that, I'm not telling you anything. In the first place, how is Kiyone here when she was out?"

"When?"

Kiyone stopped laughing and peered into Mihoshi's face.

"You won't laugh?"

"No."

Kiyone nodded.

"You definitely won't get mad?"

"I swear by the god of the Galaxy Police."

"Okay so, I think... it's like this."

Mihoshi sat down in the grass and began talking about how Washu had made a simulation program; the crystal ball in the lab; how the program was in RPG format; how only Tenchi was supposed to be transferred; how she'd glimpsed Tenchi and Ryoko and the others for just a moment during transfer; and more.

"...So basically, you're saying this is the world Washu-san made for Tenchi-san. And why did everyone get transferred?"

Mihoshi fidgeted.

"Don't get mad."

"Just say it." Kiyone had a pretty good idea already, but wasn't sure she could avoid shouting.

"It seems like me pressing extra switches was the cause."

"What switch?"

Kiyone's voice went sweet as a cat's.

"Well, there were all these notes posted—don't touch, don't mess with it, those without clearance stay away. I wanted to see the pretty prism inside the crystal ball, and I thought if I turned this off the blocking cover would come off... When I looked more carefully, it said 'protection release switch' on it."

Kiyone tilted her head.

"Usually something like that has two or three layers of protection before you can release it."

"After I turned it off, a display came up saying enter the password, enter the secret code. So I typed something in at random. 'Washu-chan is a genius, the best in the universe.' And then..."

"...Jackpot..."

Kiyone suddenly grabbed Mihoshi by the lapels.

"It was you who did it!!"

"Yeeeek, save me..." Mihoshi trembled.

"I didn't d-do it on purpose!"

"Who would release a secret code on purpose you idiot!!"

"I-I had no bad intentions."

"Would someone with bad intentions do such a thing!?"

"Eeeee... you got mad after all~"

Seeing Mihoshi crying her eyes out, Kiyone abruptly lost her will to fight.

"That's just the kind of person you are... I sometimes wonder why you don't put that talent to use in things like well-digging or fortune-telling."

"What can I say?"

Mihoshi sniffled.

"It's not too late. You become a horse-race predictor and we team up! We quit the thankless detective business, and the two of us make a killing. Stocks, lotteries, roulette, poker—the materials for getting rich are rolling around everywhere. Just once, think seriously about career aptitude..."

"You know money-related stuff is completely hopeless for me, Kiyone-chan!"
Mihoshi wiped her tears and rubbed her hands on her mini-shorts.
"How many times have I bet on DevilWing and lost? You remember, right?"
"Right. When you bet on DevilWing, AngelDust wins. When I bet on AngelDust, DevilWing wins. How many times have we wasted precious salaries like that..."
Kiyone sighed and suddenly grabbed Mihoshi's shoulders again.
"It was because of you!!"
"K-Kiyone-chan, stay calm..."
Mihoshi put on a desperate forced smile.
"Let's stop talking about Galaxy Super Dodgeball. I'm going to look for Washu-san. It's my fault, so I'll catch Washu-san wherever she is in this world and ask how to get home! Right? Simple, isn't it?"
Kiyone still didn't let go.
"How do we even get there? You must have some idea."
Mihoshi gave a vague shake of her head.
"Since Washu-san said it was in RPG format, if we find a town and gather information, then we'll probably..."
"Where is the town? What's it called?"
"...I think it's in the strategy guide."
"....."
Kiyone let go without a word, stood up, and brushed off dead grass and grass seeds.
"Where are you going?"
"To find a town. Same as a normal mission. We'll ask around systematically and investigate. Drag your feet and I'll pull your ears!"
Mihoshi jumped up and retrieved the short sword.
"Can thieves go into towns?"
"You're a detective!?"
"In this getup?"
"You look like a disciple of Robin Hood."
Kiyone suddenly remembered.
"Do you have your blaster?"
Mihoshi shook her head vigorously.
"Were you holding it?"
"I was. But what I've got now is just a short sword and a knife."
Kiyone furrowed her brow.
"So our weapons changed when our memories were sealed. And the fact that we were

given precise names and settings means we were probably assigned to characters in this world—specifically, characters that Tenchi-kun was destined to encounter. In other words, Ryoko-san and the others are also playing key characters in this world at the right moments. Make sense?"

"The so-called 'event characters,' hm. Kiyone-chan, you're amazing!"

"It's elementary, my dear Watson."

Kiyone gave a satisfied grin, readjusted her handbag on her shoulder.

"Let's go, Mihoshi!"

"Yeeees!"

MihoKiyo set out, leaving the Field of Departure behind.

# Level 3:

# One Hour from the Field of Departure

One hour's walk from the Field of Departure along the main road and something glittering came into view.

"Kiyone-chan, I... my feet hurt. I'm also hungry and thirsty."

"All right, all right. Just a little more. I'm so glad I wore sneakers. If I'd been in heels, I'd have quit the adventure by now."

Kiyone encouraged the endurance-challenged ex-thief and squinted at the gold tower gleaming in the distance.

"That must be a castle or something. At the foot of the castle town is the town we're heading for. No doubt."

"I wonder if there's a convenience store. I want a donut shop and a cake shop too. How about a beef bowl place and a sushi place. And a noodle shop, that's not bad. And a tempura place can't be passed up either. A steakhouse is quite welcome too. Oh, and a ramen place and a curry place."

"You know..."

Kiyone's brow got a vertical wrinkle.

"Is it fun to fantasize like that when it's completely pointless?"

"But I'm hungry!"

Mihoshi teared up.

"I don't even have one piece of chocolate. An excursion without snacks and a bento box is like a swim meet without the ocean. Kiyone-chan, don't you have anything to eat?"

Kiyone opened her handbag and shook her head.

"Only Jintan."

"Jintan?"

"It’s something too strong for children."

Kiyone suddenly remembered something more important.

"Do you have money?"

Mihoshi stopped in surprise and searched her pockets.

"I don't."

"Figures."

Kiyone nodded and checked inside her wallet.

"One... two... it's in there all right. The question is whether this money can be used. What's the currency in this world?"

"Uh..."

Mihoshi furrowed her brow.

"No good. When I stopped being Claire, it seems that kind of memory got erased too."

"If this money can't be used, we have nothing."

"Oh no."

Mihoshi, in her thief's getup, with both fists at her mouth, looking wide-eyed, was a picture that could only look like a gag.

"No hamburger? No sushi? No donuts?"

"We'll have to sit by the roadside with an empty can."

"Is THAT what adventure is!?"

"Don't blame me. You're not the only one who's hungry."

For a while after that, the two walked on in silence.

Just when Kiyone had taken off her sweatshirt to just a T-shirt and Mihoshi thought she couldn't take one more step, the town entrance appeared.

"We're here."

Kiyone looked up at the brass gate and read the bronze plate polished to a deep red.

"The Town of the Sun. No wonder it's so hot."

"Something smells good!"

Mihoshi immediately perked up and grabbed Kiyone's hand, starting to run.

"The smell of yakisoba! Fried potatoes and sausages! Coffee!!"

"Yakisoba!?"

Fewer than ten steps past the gate, MihoKiyo ran into a young man together, making a lariat of themselves.

Of course, it was their own fault for running hand-in-hand down the middle of the main street.

"...owww..."

The young man, with golden hair, blue eyes, and pointed ears—a typical elven pretty-boy look—shook his head, not understanding what had happened.

"Oh, sorry..."

"Are you all right?"

"...ugh..."
The young man, pulled up from both sides, looked back and forth at MihoKiyo.

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"That's unusual. Are you adventurers?"
MihoKiyo exchanged glances.
"In what sense is that unusual?"
"Those clothes. Fighter-type or something? And you—you're a thief, right? In this peaceful world, a girl not wearing a skirt can only be an adventurer."
"It's peaceful?"
Kiyone blinked.
"Uh, aren't there evil wizards and terrifying dragons?"
"There are. But not in town. Dragons have territories too, and towns are connected by magic gates, so ordinary people like us don't have to pass through wastelands or rocky mountains. Only adventurers go looking for trouble. Some people have trouble with monsters, others seek fame or money—so there's a reasonable demand for adventurers. Well..."
The young man started to leave, but Kiyone grabbed his arm firmly.
"Oh! Excuse me—could you tell us if this money can be used here?"

In the corner of a food stall, MihoKiyo silently shoveled mountains of fried potatoes into their mouths and washed them down with coffee.
The young man stared blankly as the contents of his wallet disappeared into the mouths of these strange women.
"Truly, I'm terribly sorry, Pete-san. You not only fed us hamburgers but also chicken, potatoes, and coffee."
Kiyone elegantly dabbed her lips and gave a sweet smile.
"N-no problem..."
"I feel truly terrible about not being able to give you anything in return."
"It's not as if I intended..."
"See? I told you, didn't I?"
Mihoshi beamed, licking oil from her fingers.
"There was a hamburger place, just like I said."

"I'm amazed."

Kiyone glanced outside the stall.

"This town and its people are straight out of fantasy, but everything you wanted to eat is here."

"By the way, Pete-san."

Mihoshi turned back, still smiling.

"Now that we've had our fill, would you be willing to show us around the town?"

Pete, flanked on both sides by the two squealing women, was seriously pondering how he'd ended up in this situation.

As for the two women—Mihoshi was now dressed in a Laura Ashley one-piece with a daisy corsage on her hat, and a basket in her hand, wearing short boots. Kiyone had traded her sweatshirt for the floral-print dress she'd been carrying tied around her waist, and was holding a freshly purchased ice cream.

"Pete-san, you're truly a wonderful person. You fed us, showed us around, and now you're even accompanying us shopping. Somehow I don't feel like I've just met you."

"I know... why is that!?"

Pete thought of the nearly empty wallet.

"I feel like I can't just leave you two. So... did you come to this town as tourists?"

"That's the thing."

Mihoshi nodded.

"We're looking for someone. A genius scientist named Washu—she looks a bit like a child, but she's really twenty thousand years old, and her personality is terribly warped and mean, and she's always yelling at me."

Pete blinked.

"O-oh, um, actually that's not right! Hold on, Mihoshi!"

Kiyone hurriedly jumped in.

"We came from another town looking for our companions. Have you heard the name Washu?"

"Washu...?"

"She's probably a well-known person."

"I don't think she's in this town... a scientist?"

"Well, um..."

Kiyone was at a loss for words.

Nothing is more pointless than explaining science in a fantasy world.

"A scientist is someone who says and does things you can't make sense of, locks

herself in a lab and builds unbelievable things, and creates more problems—that kind of person."

"Oh, a wizard?"

Mihoshi's explanation made Pete clap his hands together.

"A magic user? If you're looking for a wizard, that's me!"

"What!?"

Both women simultaneously clasped both fists to their mouths and struck a look of surprise.

"You!?"

"You weren't just an ordinary person!?"

"...I'm a student at the magic academy."

Pete answered with a slightly wounded expression.

"So—what are you two? Where are you from? I've made all this effort, so I think I have a right to know. Or is there some other kind of payment in return?"

"Other payment?"

Mihoshi looked at Pete blankly.

"Like, for example..."

Pete looked around.

"...see that inn over there? In return for my sincere outpouring of goodwill, you could give just a tiny little something back... Ahh, what on earth am I saying!?"

MihoKiyo looked down at Pete, who had crouched down with his head in his hands, and exchanged glances.

"Forget what I just said. It's inexcusable of me to harbor vulgar desires toward two penniless, helpless young ladies, like some evil sorcerer. I had just sworn not to engage in words or deeds that would degrade my character."

"Um... Pete-san?"

Mihoshi tentatively called out to him.

"I'm not sure what happened, but I will never forget this kindness. I'll definitely pay back the money some day."

"That's right. Until the day we safely return to our original world..."

"Your original world?"

Pete looked up.

"Your original world—don't tell me you came from a different world..."

The moment Kiyone saw the young man's anxious expression, she regretted speaking up, but it was too late.

"Pete-san, let me be frank: we absolutely need to find a person named Washu and get

home. The money I had is from Earth—a world called Japan. We just arrived here, walking all the way from the Field of Departure."

"Earth... Japan... the Field of Departure!?"

Pete shot to his feet.

"This is serious! We have to go to the castle at once! I don't know which of you is the hero, but hurry!"

"Um... wait!"

MihoKiyo gathered their skirt hems and started running after Pete who was sprinting away at full speed.

"Why is this, such... an emergency?"

"Because it's the end of the world!"

Pete shouted back, out of breath.

"The prophecy says, 'When the hero comes forth from the Field of Departure and passes through the gate of the Sun, destruction visits this world—that is, the beginning of the Final Seven Days.' In other words—"

Pete stopped and pressed a hand to his chest, catching his breath.

"The day of destruction foretold in legend has come."

"Wait a moment—why does the world end just because WE showed up!?"

Kiyone, who had finally caught up, grabbed Pete's sleeve like capturing a fleeing criminal.

"Because the Demon King is reviving!"

Pete wrenched his sleeve free and started running again.

"Everyone——! Make way please! The hero—a double hero has appeared——"

And the lively town square fell suddenly silent.

The next moment, it erupted like a terrorist attack.

"A hero!?"

"A hero, you say!?"

"Two thousand years of peace, and now this."

"A double hero!?"

"Ahh, I just built a house with a thirty-year mortgage!"

"One is frightening enough, but two—what on earth will happen..."

"My daughter just turned three..."

"My business that was finally getting on track..."

"Hey, that guy's eating without paying!"

"The world is going to end anyway—!"

Through the screaming and shouting crowd, MihoKiyo and student wizard Pete

pushed, ran, stumbled, and barreled forward.

"W-we've arrived."

Pete stopped in front of a large drawbridge.

"This is the Golden Castle of King Shamsiel."

MihoKiyo spent a moment in silence catching their breath and gazing up at the sparkling castle on the other side of the drawbridge.

"Welcome, young ladies."

The twin guards standing at the drawbridge with halberds made a solemn challenge.

"What brings you to the Golden Castle?"

"It's an emergency."

Pete stepped forward.

"I must have an audience with the king with all haste."

"And what is the reason?"

"I'm Pete from the magic academy—and these two ladies are heroes who came from the Field of Departure!"

"What!?"

The two guards nearly dropped their halberds.

"Hold, hold. Do not move from here. I'll go check right now."

Apparently so rattled he'd forgotten the dignified speech of a guard, the man nodded to his partner and hurried off.

"Hero!! That's absurd!"

The one left behind squeezed his hands nervously and looked back and forth between the retreating partner and MihoKiyo. Finally he seemed to think of something, and struck the cobblestones with the butt of his halberd.

"Don't take me for a fool! How could such cute young ladies be heroes? The tapestry in the audience chamber clearly shows a male hero! A round-faced boy from the country of Earth, the village of Japan. That contradicts the prophecy! Or are you saying the tapestry—said to have been given directly by the great Mingler Chaos to King Shamsiel the First—is a joke!?"

MihoKiyo exchanged looks in bewilderment.

"What to do, Kiyone. This person seems angry for some reason."

"He's not mad—he just doesn't believe us."

Kiyone steeled herself and turned to face the guard.

"Hey, soldier. We ourselves don't understand a single thing about what's going on. Having a big fuss made every single time is already getting old. Is this how a hero is welcomed—stopped at the castle gate? If we're wrong, it's you who'll be scolded by the king, not us. We don't need an escort, so just step aside and let us through. Or are

you looking to face off against the heroes?"

She struck a decisive pose.

Without the floral-print dress it would have been perfect, but the guard was intimidated and stepped back.

"I'm merely being faithful to my duty..."

"We have a hero's mission! Don't interfere!"

"Hold on, Kyo-chan..."

Mihoshi tugged on the sleeve of Kiyone, who was waving the word "hero" around like an entry ticket.

"It's fine, Mihoshi. If we call ourselves heroes, we can go anywhere in this world with the king's stamp of approval. We have to travel this world from here on, so the more perks there are, the easier it'll be."

Kiyone replied quietly and turned back to face the guard.

"Well!?"

"I-It’s beyond my authority alone to decide..."

Just as the guard was in agony, caught between two options, the first guard came running back.

"Heroes! I sincerely apologize for the great rudeness. You are indeed the heroes. The king awaits in the audience chamber. Please, this way as well."

The guards bobbed up and down like pecking hens in front of Kiyone, who'd had her fist raised, and the other guard jabbed his stunned partner.

"Hey, what are you standing there for? In the presence of the heroes. Bow properly!"

"O-oh..."

The twin guard bowed his head in surprise.

"I beg your pardon. This one is Dee, and I am Dum. Please lower your fist and follow us."

The twin guards Dum and Dee clattered along in their armor across the drawbridge and halted before the castle gate.

"What exactly is going on?"

Just as Kiyone was whispering to Pete in confusion—

"Make way for the heroooooes!"

The huge brass doors groaned open from the inside.

# Level 4:

# The Moment We Passed Through the Castle Gate

The moment they passed through the castle gate, magnificent fanfare rang out.

Down the long path all the way to the distant glittering golden throne, crimson carpet was laid, and rows of guards and ladies and gentlemen lined both sides, watching the heroes' audience.

"Woooow... it's like a movie for real..."

Mihoshi gazed up at a ceiling painting of angels in flight, swept her eyes across the portraits hanging behind the ladies and gentlemen, and nearly veered off the path, drawn in by the gemstones adorning the noblewomen's dresses.

"Mihoshi! Keep looking straight ahead!"

Kiyone grabbed Mihoshi's ponytail in a panic and strode briskly down the long, long red carpet.

Behind them, Pete followed with a worried frown.

"You have come a long way. Heroes from another world."

A mournful voice resonated.

"I am Shamsiel the Twenty-Third, lord of this Golden Castle. Dark-haired female hero, what is your name?"

"My name is Kiyone."

Kiyone bowed politely.

"Mihoshi!"

"Honored to be in Your Majesty's gracious presence—Pete of the Sierra Magic Academy."

Greetings done, the middle-aged king gave a deep sigh.

The depth of that sigh was such that it almost seemed it might blow him away.

"So then, hero and your companions."

The king murmured in a voice as dark as a nighttime toilet.

"Why did you appear in my era? Why did you not stay peacefully within the prophetic tapestry? And what does it mean for a substitute to appear suddenly, just this morning!?"

"Substitute!?"

Kiyone was dumbfounded.

"Until yesterday, a round-faced boy was in the tapestry of the hero."

The king pointed to a large tapestry hanging behind the throne.

"A timid-looking boy wearing a 'samue' coat. It had been like that for two thousand years. But this morning, when the maid came to dust it, it had changed to a woman kicking slimes. I thought it must be some kind of joke. I was quite tempted to wrap this thing up and toss it in the storage room. The woman walked briskly forward and eventually reached the Gate of the Sun. By the time lunch began, she had changed into a floral-print dress. And the last time I checked, she had her fist raised at the gatekeeper."

"....."

"Now she stands before me."

Kiyone looked up at the tapestry.

There was a picture of herself—backing a sunburst-like radiant pattern and striking a grand pose in a floral-print one-piece—that looked more like a comedy skit than anything else.

"Ewww, my feet are splayed outward! Kiyone, that's super embarrassing!"

"Mihoshi!"

Mihoshi barely dodged Kiyone's punch.

"Your Majesty! There is a deep reason for this..."

"No doubt."

The king wearily nodded.

"Whether you're a substitute or a woman, I don't much care. The problem is—why today?! Listen here: seven days from now, a coronation ceremony is to be held in my kingdom. A wedding will also take place at the same time. A new king will be born, and I will finally retire to live in ease. But thanks to you appearing, hero, that's all for nothing! Even now, deep in the underground labyrinth, the Demon King is awakening, and the world must be trembling with the sense of doom. Can this be called anything other than misfortune? A bolt from the blue is what this is. Oh, what bad luck! What a losing lot! Hero—for this reason, I am now plunged in grief."

"Um..."

Unable to speak after being talked over, Kiyone gave way to Mihoshi, who timidly stepped forward.

"Can I ask something? In this world, when a hero appears, does the Demon King revive?"

"That's right."

The king seemed tired of talking too.

"And the Heroes don't save the world?"

"Normally they do."

"Then if we defeat the Demon King, the world won't have to be destroyed, right?"

"Is that a new joke?"

The king slouched limply in his throne and looked the Laura Ashley one-piece up and down.

"You'd be blown away by a dragon's snort the moment you stepped outside the castle walls."

"How rude!"

Mihoshi put her hands on her hips and stared the king down.

"I thought kings were supposed to cry to heroes and ask them to save the world. You see, heroes—they get woken up by their mother, then go to the castle. Their starting funds are in treasure chests. If they say 'no,' they keep being asked the same thing until they say 'yes.' They get loads of money just for defeating monsters. And they can open up anyone's drawers and pots without anyone saying a word. So I always thought heroes could do anything."

"This is a law-abiding nation." The king said in exasperation.

"What you're describing sounds like banditry or burglary to me. What on earth could a pair of thin arms like yours do? What's your class, anyway? Are you an apprentice housewife? A shopgirl? I could hire you as a dishwasher. That one over there seems marginally better, so feel free to practice swordsmanship or archery—whatever you like. When the Demon King knocks at the castle gate in seven days, just step out and fight briefly. You may step down."

The king waved his hand feebly.

"The world is over. I no longer care."

"What——! Don't be so defeatist!"

Mihoshi couldn't help but press both fists firmly to her mouth, eyes welling up.

"Is it okay if the world is destroyed!? Is it okay if the Demon King isn't defeated!? Then we won't be able to get home! Even though we're offering to fight for you—you

won't give us weapons or anything!?"
"MY world is going to disappear."
The king didn't have the strength to even stand.
"Take whatever swords and armor you want. I'm going to bed."
"WHAT——!"
Mihoshi rushed up to the throne and shook the king vigorously.
"This won't do! If you don't properly back us up, we can't go on an adventure! The Demon King might be open to reason too, and I'm great at winning people over with tears! If it comes to it, I can just cry the Demon King to death! We're called the invincible MihoKiyo combo in the Galaxy Police, you know. Please believe in us just a little!"
"That's enough, Mihoshi!"
Kiyone cut in, forehead with prominent vertical creases, and a dark cloud hovering in her background.
"This pathetic world can go ahead and be destroyed! The Demon King— He isn't even here yet—and they just turn to jelly without even fighting! This kingdom is spineless! Your petty sword isn't needed. I'll fight with my bare hands! You can just stand there and tremble! And what kind of country is this to treat the heroes like this!?"
And then.

GOOOOOOOO.....
An eerie rumble shook the ground.
Kiyone froze with her fist raised.
"What was that!?"
"The Demon King..."
Pete, who had been watching anxiously from the sidelines, hardened his expression.
"...the Demon King is trying to awaken."

GOOOOOOOO.....

The rumble resounded again.
An unsettling vibration ran through the floor, and stained glass windows trembled.
A murmur spread through the ladies and gentlemen standing like mannequins.
"...The Demon King. The Seven Days of Destruction have begun!"
The king finally buried his head in his hands.
"Hero—say no more. I wish to spend my remaining short life in peace. Please leave this country quietly. I will have the chamberlain send money later."

"Oh, come on! An earthquake or two, even a catfish could cause that! A rumble or two is nothing! How have you even been running a country like this!? It's because you're such a wimp that the townspeople go into a panic just because a hero walked past! Let's go, Mihoshi! We won't save a country like this even if they beg us!"

Kiyone spun on her heel and strode away.

"Kyo-chan, wait!"

Mihoshi rushed after her.

"O-Your Majesty... I'm terribly sorry..."

Pete, worried about the two of them, knelt before the king.

"That's fine, Pete. Tell those two: the magic gate to the Moon Valley is at the edge of town."

"Y-yes..."

Pete stood up.

"Hey——! Wait——"

The next moment, on the long long carpet where not even the royal guards had ever run, Pete was going at full speed.

"Heh..."

A man standing with his arms crossed in the shadow of a pillar had been watching the whole scene.

"Interesting... truly interesting. A substitute for the hero. In twenty-nine years of life, I have finally encountered something interesting."

The man with brilliant golden hair casually threw back his mantle and slipped swiftly into the pillar's shadow.

# Level 5:

# Kiyone-saaan, Mihoshi-saaan

"Kiyone-saan, Mihoshi-saaaan"

Pete was desperately chasing after the two.

"Where are you going——! Wait, I said——"

Kiyone suddenly stopped, and Pete almost crashed his nose into her.

"Unforgivable..."

"Hm!?"

"Unforgivable!!"

Kiyone raised her fist, a sharp pair of vertical creases in her brow.

"I'm the hero!! Why do I have to be kicked around by the king!? Does this country want to be destroyed? Then I'LL destroy it! Who cares about a Demon King? Don't make a fool of the female hero!!"

"K-Kiyone-chan, I think that's a bit off!?"

Mihoshi desperately tried to soothe her.

"We're looking for Washu-san and going home. We didn't come to save this world. Who cares about a Demon King a week from now? Let's gather information for the time being..."

"Hm...!?"

Hero Kiyone froze in place gazing up at the sky.

She slowly lowered her fist.

"Right. What am I saying? I couldn't care less about the Demon King. I need to find Washu-san as quickly as possible. And now I've wasted another whole day. Mihoshi! Money? ID? Do we need anything else to leave this town?"

Mihoshi shook her head feebly.

"...I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know... what did we even go to the castle for?"

"To yell at the king."

Huuruuururu.....

A pitiless wind blew down the middle of the main road.
"W-what do we do... we're broke AND wanted criminals..."
"Aren't you the hero!?"
MihoKiyo whipped around.
"Pete!!"
"You've finally noticed me. I came to deliver the king's message, at any rate."
"A message?"
"The magic gate to the Moon Valley is at the edge of town, he says."
"That's it?"
"That's it."
Silence descended over the middle of the road again.
"...For the time being, would you like to come to my room? It's student housing, but..."

Fifteen minutes later, MihoKiyo and Pete were in Room 201 of the student dormitory on the grounds of the Sierra Magic Academy.
It was summer vacation, so there were almost no students around.
Through the window could be seen a green lawn and trees casting comfortable shadows.
Cicada calls showered down, and Kiyone was suddenly reminded of the grounds of the Masaki Shrine, so far away.
"Only barley tea, I'm afraid."
Pete came back from the mini kitchen with three glasses on a tray.
The three of them drank cold barley tea and for a while looked out at the deserted campus below.
"I'm sorry, Kiyone-san. When I heard you'd come from the Field of Departure, I completely misunderstood..."
"...It's strange."
Kiyone murmured with a furrowed brow.
"The moment I entered the castle, I felt some strange power surge through me. That I'm the hero, and heroes save the world. It wasn't because you told me I was a hero. Before I went in, I just thought calling myself a hero would make the journey ahead

more convenient. Hey, Pete-san—please tell me. What's up with the tapestry? What is this world called?"

"You really don't know anything?"

Pete's eyes went wide.

"Then you really did come from another world. This world is called Heartsease. It's made up of seven regions. Look."

Pete pointed at a map on the wall.

"Moon Valley, Flame Mountain, Lake of Grace... using the gates, you can travel around in a day. That Washu person must be somewhere in one of these seven towns. Do you have other companions?"

"Yes. Tenchi, Ryoko, Ayeka, Sasami, Washu... do any of these names ring a bell?"

Pete thought hard with furrowed brow, then shook his head.

"Are they all from your world?"

"Yes. It's a bit of an accident."

"An accident?"

"Yes. Originally, the one who was supposed to appear in this world as the hero was Tenchi-san."

Kiyone started.

"The tapestry! You said a round-faced boy was in it, right? What was he like? Draw it for me!"

Pete, bewildered, drew a clumsy but recognizable image on the back of a notebook page.

It was a smiling boy in a samue coat, short-haired and round-faced.

"It's Tenchi-san!!"

Mihoshi cried out.

"Why did it become Kiyone? Did calling herself the hero make that happen? Hey, Pete-san—in this world, does whoever declares themselves the hero become the hero?"

"No, that's the prophetic tapestry—it's said to have been given by the gods when this world was born. That Tenchi person must have been abandoned by the gods, I suppose... That's it!!"

Pete stood up.

"You must still be the hero! Become the hero! Kiyone-san, don't worry about the king. King Shamsiel has good governance but is a weak man. He couldn't even properly raise his only son Zaphiel. Did you see the prince? Blond, tall... that prince is a scoundrel. He refuses to take over and wanders around, and a fiancée has been pressuring him

into a wedding ceremony seven days from now. The innkeeper is even betting that this troublemaker won't sit on the throne for three days... well, where was I?"

"A scoundrel prince."

Mihoshi answered eagerly.

"...That's not the point! The hero! Kiyone-san! Please save this world! The tapestry showed you full of strength and resolve. To get to the Demon King's castle, you must take the gates one after another in order. Along the way you can look for your companions! I'll be your guide. It's summer vacation anyway, and if the Demon King revives the world will be destroyed. I don't have money but I can do a little magic. I can put up monster-repelling barriers too. This isn't a peaceful town, and the king may be a wimp, but I love this town. I can't bear to think of the Demon King's forces flooding in and trampling it all. I want to keep studying at this academy and become a great wizard one day. I want to improve the magic gates, and research effective uses of dragon fire-breath. I have dreams too. Kiyone-san, please say yes!"

Kiyone stared speechlessly at Pete's young, flushed face.

Dreams... what are you talking about.

She swallowed the words that had risen to her lips.

You're a character in the game that Washu-san made.

This world, the Demon King—they're just a program.

You live and speak only because someone pressed the start button.

But Kiyone said nothing.

Instead of speaking, she took Pete's hand and gripped it firmly.

"I am the hero. Substitute or female—that doesn't matter. Hero Kiyone will defeat the Demon King, save the world, and become a legend. And you will be known as the great wizard who fought alongside the hero, and a fine bronze statue will be erected on the academy campus. By the time you retire and your son becomes the academy director, you'll surely be telling your grandchildren about your adventure. 'Back in the old days, when I was still an apprentice wizard...' Well? How does that sound?"

Pete's face lit up and broke into a smile so pleasant even a dragon would have had to smile back.

"Thank you, Kiyone-san. You are a kind and courageous true hero!"

"Of course!"

"Wonderful!"

Mihoshi clapped her hands together.

"We can really go on a real adventure! I always thought traveling with a wizard was

only in stories, but we can be the main characters in a story, with love and adventure!"

"You two are the protagonists."

Pete saw a sparkling star in Mihoshi's blue eyes and for some reason went red, mumbling something under his breath.

"I hope you'll have a wonderful romance."

"Hm?"

"Oh, nothing. I have to get ready..."

The moment Pete turned his back he stumbled on a chair, and by the time he reached the locker door he'd gone even redder.

"I'm sorry, could you wait outside for a moment? I'll change in a flash..."

MihoKiyo hurriedly stepped outside, then traded with the wizard who came out in his formal attire, and changed back into their regular clothes.

Spending what was supposed to be living-expense savings on the few small purchases needed, MihoKiyo plus their wizard—looking less like adventurers and more like a suspicious trio—left the town as the long day was drawing toward its close.

"I've been waiting forever."

The blond man who had been leaning against the traveler's window came straight toward Kiyone the moment he saw her face.

"I've been waiting three hours to give you a small present. Here—your travel permit. And here's money. Five hundred gold inside."

"Prince Zaphiel!?"

Pete came running up in surprise.

"What are you doing here?"

"Is it wrong for me to be here?"

The man—lithe and tall, with straight blond hair cut at the shoulder, wearing a copper-red breastplate and a deep red mantle the color of blood—scrunched his handsome face and looked down at Pete.

"A little adventure before going to my grave. Dad sends his regards."

"That can't be serious!?"

Pete shot back.

"The prince has a guard on him for the wedding and coronation preparations..."

"I'm joking."

The prince laughed. His expression looked unexpectedly candid when he smiled.

"It's not a joke that the day of the coronation the sky will go dark and the world will

be destroyed. What IS a joke, if not that? Hey, woman!"

This greeting was directed at Kiyone.

"Step down from your substitute role right now. I'll take down the Demon King. You should go to the monastery in the Moon Valley and pray. As for that one with the yellow ribbon—she's rather cute. I'll appoint her as my night's companion."

The prince jutted his chin at the rainbow-colored magic gate that gleamed nearby.

"If we go now, we can enjoy a whole evening. Come, hurry or the gate will close."

As the prince turned his back, a two-handed greatsword in a golden scabbard could be seen hanging on his shoulder.

The pommel bore the engraved crest of the sun—it looked like a noble sword with a distinguished history.

"Hurry up."

The prince turned back impatiently with a furrowed brow.

"What did you say!?"

Kiyone, who had been listening in stunned silence, walked up and slapped the prince hard across the cheek.

"Who are you calling 'woman'!? I have a perfectly good name—Kiyone! And I am the hero! I don't know if you're a prince or what, but you're just a scoundrel! Go home and put your father's mind at ease!!"

"I'm tired of strong-willed women."

The prince said his private thought aloud, and casually grabbed Kiyone's wrist.

"Sorry for not inviting you. You hate praying? Then let's make it a double play."

He dodged her other slap effortlessly and lifted Kiyone with ease.

"Open the gate! I command in the name of Zaphiel!"

The strangely flustered gatekeeper worked his hands inside the gatehouse, and rainbow light spread across the inside of the gate.

"Put me down! I'll bite you!!"

The moment the prince vanished into the rainbow, Kiyone's voice vanished too.

"Kiyone!?"

Mihoshi went pale and dove into the gate, and the panicking Pete followed.

After the four adventurers disappeared, the rainbow light slowly faded and returned to normal.

"May the blessing of Mingler Chaos be upon you."

The gatekeeper made the victory rune on his chest and slowly returned inside the gatehouse.

# Level 6:

# We've Arrived, Woman

"We've arrived, woman."

Kiyone, who had been in the middle of trying to bite the prince's arm when she was enveloped in a rainbow dizziness, looked blankly around at her surroundings.

The air was cool.

Around the gate was a small garden, and ball-shaped lamps illuminated low shrubbery tangled in the gathering dusk.

The wind that touched her skin felt as if the seasons had turned back.

A gatehouse stood next to the gate, and the guard confirmed Prince Zaphiel's face and nodded.

"You're heavier than expected. And quite muscular."

The prince's words snapped Kiyone back to herself.

"Let me down!"

The prince released Kiyone without ceremony and started walking ahead.

"Kiyone——!"

Mihoshi and Pete tumbled out of the gate.

"Are you all right? What about the prince?"

At that voice, the prince turned.

"Hey, Ribbon-chan."

"I'm not Ribbon-chan!"

Mihoshi shook her ponytail and walked up to the prince until she was right next to him, then put her hands on her hips and glared up at him—a full head taller than her.

"If you won't call me by my proper name, I'm not going to call you by yours either!"

"Understood, understood."

The prince raised a hand in resignation.

"I must apologize, Lady Mihoshi and Hero Lady Kiyone. I am Zaphiel—prince of the Shamsiel Kingdom, only son of King Shamsiel. The wizard Pete and I are acquainted. Will this do?"

The prince bowed elegantly.

"Look at that—you can be elegant when you try."

Kiyone came over with a hostile expression.

"Stop your scoundrel antics, ungrateful prince. Hurry home and reassure your father."

"Save the lectures."

The prince waved his hand dismissively and started walking.

"Are you really planning to fight the Demon King? Do you even know what the Demon King is? What do you plan to fight with? Fists and nails and ribbons wouldn't be enough to take down even my father. Although that slap just now did have a certain impact."

The prince rubbed his cheek and gave a sardonic grin.

"What's in that pack? Don't tell me it's cold chicken and champagne. Hey, Pete—wearing a black robe, you look just like a wizard."

"I am an authentic wizard."

Pete drew himself up as much as he could and hitched up his slipping backpack.

"I was the top student at the academy—before this prince dragged me into helping with his misdeeds."

"Don't say such terrible things."

The prince put an arm around Pete's shoulders familiarly.

"You only unlocked a little lock."

"What about the sleep spell you cast on the butler?"

"He shouldn't have shown his face at that hour."

"We were the ones sneaking in in the middle of the night."

"I was going crazy, couldn't get that girl's smile out of my head."

The prince touched the sword pommel and whispered.

"Say another word and I'll tickle you with this."

Pete went pale and shut his mouth. And then suddenly music came drifting from somewhere.

A relaxed two-beat rhythm with a chanting voice layered undulating on top.

Several lights swayed from the far end of the road and crossed at an intersection.

"Oh..."

The prince stopped and strained his eyes into the dusk.

"Right, the Moon Festival! The shrine maiden is coming out from the Silver Temple. Hurry!"

The prince strode away rapidly, and MihoKiyo reluctantly started running too.

"Mihoshi, aren't we just running everywhere?"

"Adventure is exhausting."

"It's the prince's fault for meeting us."

After that, neither of the three said a word until they reached the Moon Valley.

The Moon Valley was a small basin surrounded by steep slopes, and the Silver Temple was quietly set against two mountains hugging its innermost depths.

The full moon rose in the sky, and the temple shone silver-white, true to its name.

"Looks delicious... like it's made of sugar!"

Seeing the rough white marble reflecting the moonlight with a sparkling gleam, Mihoshi involuntarily swallowed.

"This temple was built to enshrine the moon goddess."

The prince magnanimously provided commentary from the front row of the plaza.

"In my kingdom, the sun god gives vitality to all living things, and the goddess of Moon Valley purifies every night. When these two gods wed, this world—Heartsease—was born."

"How romantic."

Mihoshi leaned over and whispered to Pete, who was sitting next to her.

"Looking at the prince's fiancée, you'll see how that old romance has weathered."

Pete whispered back so the prince couldn't hear.

"I can't see anyone's face in this darkness."

Kiyone had been desperately looking around, but couldn't find a familiar face among the gathered villagers and worshippers.

"Looking for someone? Picking up someone would be better after the feast starts."

Kiyone drove an elbow hard into the prince's side, and the prince winced and sat back up.

At that moment, the temple doors opened.

Shrine maidens in white robes carrying candlesticks appeared one after another.

Girls in flowing white dresses followed, and lastly a priestess with her hood pulled low appeared.

The chanting voices rose to a new pitch.

"Oh, moon goddess Selene. Grant your blessing upon all who gather here tonight. Hear the prayer of I, the moon priestess Freya."

The priestess removed her hood and raised both arms high.

Purple-black hair—so dark it seemed almost purple—gleamed wetly in the moonlight, and ruby-like red eyes sparkled.

"Ayeka-san!?"

Kiyone involuntarily stood up, astonishing the prince.

"Ayeka-san, right!? What are you doing here!? It's me. Kiyone."

"Who goes there!?"
The line of shrine maidens broke and a murmur spread.
"My name is Freya. Moon Priestess. Who is it that interrupts the Priestess's prayer?"
Ayeka questioned in a stern voice and walked to the edge of the altar.
"This night's full moon ceremony is an important ritual that purifies the year's nights. What is your name? Why do you interrupt?"
The priestess noticed the prince and caught her breath sharply.
"Zaphiel!?"
"Oh, Freya… or rather, Lady Freya, long time no see."
The prince reluctantly stood up.
"Oh, Ayeka-san, do you know the prince?"
Mihoshi tilted her head. And then—

From the dark shadow beside the plaza, something like a mass of darkness flew out.
The creature with black wings let out a grating cry, lunged at the moon priestess, and tore the white silk robe with razor-sharp claws.
"Kyaaaaaaa!"
"Dangerous!!"
Kiyone made a frantic dash up the steps and drove the defensive knife she carried into the creature's back.
Shhk...!

A sharp exhalation of breath.
The monster jerked its head around, fixed its turbid yellow eyes—eyes with no pupils—on Kiyone, and swept its claws sideways.
"Ha!?"
The sharp claws raked from her shoulder to her chest area, and Kiyone tumbled down the altar steps.
"Kiyone!"
Mihoshi raised her short sword.
The monster's carnivorous foot kicked the altar.
Ten curved claws spread wide like knives, leaping toward Kiyone.
And then Pete muttered something and formed a hand seal.
As if snared in a net of air, the creature's wings froze.

The half-man, half-beast creature suspended in midair went still.
"Take this!"
Like lightning, a greatsword flashed.

Grrrr...Shaaaaaa!

A line of light entered the center of the monster. The next moment, the darkness that formed its body exploded and scattered.
Not a bloodstain, not a single hair remained.
"Kiyone!?"
"Are you all right?"
Kiyone bit her lip, pulled herself upright, and smiled at Mihoshi and Pete.
"I'm fine... just a scratch... thank you."
"Can you stand?"
The prince asked with an expression completely different from before—severe.
"Wait!"
All four turned at once.
"Um... thank you for saving me. I was... completely flustered..."
Freya—a.k.a Ayeka—pulled her torn robe together and hung her head.
"I'm sorry..."
The moon priestess covered her face and sobbed.
"Monsters appearing at the Moon Ceremony... what has become of this world?"
"Let's talk, Lady Freya. But first—is there somewhere we can tend to the wounds?"
Pete released the cloth holding Kiyone's wound, and fresh blood welled up.

"...So you are the hero."
Kiyone looked closely at the spot where four deep claw marks had run like bloody trenches, then gently touched it.
Not a trace remained.
Priestess Freya—impossible to see as the same person as Ayeka—poured rich herbal wine with her own hands, wearing an expression of deep compassion, and handed it to Kiyone.
"It's a local product of Moon Valley. It has the effect of dispelling evil and restoring

vitality."

The four adventurers had eaten in Freya's private chamber and were now relaxing.

"So it was true that the Demon King had awakened."

Freya's beautiful face—and indeed, compared to normal Ayeka this was hard to believe the same person—clouded over as she looked back at Kiyone.

"Ayeka-san."

"Please say no more about that."

Freya softly refused and stood up, averting her gaze from Kiyone.

"How could I believe I was a resident of another world and had been somewhere called Okayama until yesterday? I was raised from birth as a shrine maiden. I dedicate my life as a daughter of the moon. My power of healing is a gift from Lady Selene. If I lose this faith, the power of healing is lost too."

"But..."

"Leave it for now."

The prince cut off Kiyone's words.

"Tomorrow night, the monsters will come again. Not a single one this time—they'll come in swarms. Freya, targeting you. Much blood will be shed. Those monsters are no ordinary monsters of flesh and blood."

The prince spoke urgently.

"But we can protect you. Right now, our party has no monk who can use healing arts. We need you, Freya. Are we not childhood friends? With the world trying to be destroyed right now, there's no point staying shut up in Moon Valley. Won't you come with us?"

Freya turned.

Her face—drained of color but quiet—shook her head.

"I cannot leave this valley. Priestesses' magic includes protection prayers and guardian barriers. We must protect the people of Moon Valley... I will pray for your safe journey."

Freya touched a glass bell on the table, and a clear note rang out.

A modest knock followed immediately, and a gray-hooded nun appeared.

"Please escort the hero and the others to their rooms."

The nun nodded and stood by the door.

Freya turned to Kiyone and said clearly:

"Good night, Hero. I will see you tomorrow morning."

Her voice was quiet but contained a will difficult to defy.

The prince opened his mouth but said nothing, and stood.

"Grateful for your consideration. You won't even say goodnight, will you?"

The prince spoke with disappointment in his voice and left the room without looking back.

"Ayeka-san, are you really...?"

Mihoshi started to say, but sighed and followed the prince.

Left alone, Freya slumped heavily onto the chaise, eyes closed as if exhausted.

"Ayeka? Jurai...?"

Freya collected herself, knelt before the statue of Selene, and prayed, shaking off the unease.

"Oh mother goddess, guide Freya... grant your protection to the path of the heroes..."

When the exhausted Kiyone and the others had finally fallen asleep, the priestess sat down at a small writing desk and took up her pen.

Ayeka, Jurai... on the white paper the pen moved as if accustomed to it, and Freya gasped and flung the pen away.

"I don't understand... who am I...? Zaphiel, why did you come now of all times?"

Flinging herself onto the bed, Freya wept quietly.

The next morning, Freya appeared at the breakfast table with a face that looked even whiter than before, turning it away from the others.

"In the valley gorge a short distance from this temple, in its depths, there is a gate leading to Flame Mountain. The gate to the Lake of Grace is said to be in the desert you enter after descending Flame Mountain. There are fearsome bandits on Flame Mountain, I am told. I feel terrible that I cannot be of more help, but I have prepared gifts."

Freya touched the bell as before, and the nuns entered carrying gifts.

"For the hero, a silver armor and the Sword of Selene. The armor bears a prayer of protection; the sword bears a prayer of exorcism. For Mihoshi, I give a cloak woven with moonlight."

Freya beckoned a nun and showed Mihoshi the inside of the cloak, revealing a dark navy lining.

"The outer side will not lose its light even in the dead of night, and if reversed, the words of Mephashiel will conceal your body."

"Mephashiel?"

"Do you not know?"

Freya opened her eyes in surprise.

"Ah, you too are not of this world. Mephashiel is a legendary thief said to be the

patron deity of thieves. For Pete, a ring in which healing words are sealed."

Freya stood and, removing the moonstone ring from her own finger, gently placed it in Pete's palm.

"Once, it can heal any wound, no matter how deep. For Zaphiel..."

Freya stood beside the prince and hesitated, gripping both hands tightly.

Then she bent and kissed the prince on the forehead.

After Freya lifted her lips, a silver crescent rose on his forehead, flashing with light and then disappearing.

"Forgive me..."

Freya went pale and stepped back, avoiding Kiyone's gaze.

"Truly... I should have given this blessing to the hero... May Selene's divine protection be upon you all on your journey."

Tears ran down Freya's cheeks.

"I cannot see you off—I'm terribly sorry. This person, Nannel, will escort you to the gate."

Without touching a single bite of breakfast, Freya left the room. Left behind were the four adventurers and a young serving nun.

Carrying their unsolved mystery, Kiyone and the others finished preparing and left the Moon Valley—the sun already high by the time they had left, halfway up the silver mountain's side.

No one spoke.

After the four heroes passed through the gate and vanished, the young nun shook her head.

"Prince Zaphiel didn't look like a scoundrel at all. He and Lady Freya would make such a lovely couple!"

The still-young nun stuck out her tongue.

"Maybe I'll quit being a nun. Marriage is a woman's happiness after all."

She pictured the prince's strong back and smiled to herself.

Then sighed and began walking back the way she came.

# Level 7:

# Flames Leaped Before My Eyes...

Flames leaped before their eyes, and the next moment they were blown away.

Kiyone and the others took one step out of the gate and froze.

From cracks scattered here and there across the plateau where not a blade of grass grew, flames spurted up and were blown away by the ceaseless strong wind.

"Is this... Flame Mountain?"

"It seems so."

Mihoshi and Pete stood side by side, staring at the desolate plateau like children on a field trip.

"This isn't a sightseeing trip."

The prince said irritably and strode forward, his cloak wrapped tightly around himself.

The deep-red mantle had a spell woven in to moderate the heat of the flames.

Kiyone followed the prince with a difficult expression.

She had been thinking continuously since the previous night.

"Kiyone-chan, you'll get permanent wrinkles."

Mihoshi caught up and whispered.

"It's about Ayeka-san, right? I felt the same way at first, but she's really gotten into character. Without bringing Tenchi-san here, she's not going to snap out of it."

"You're right, you're right."

Kiyone looked up as if waking.

"Tenchi-san! I've been so wrapped up in everything, I haven't even thought about Tenchi-san. What in the world is he doing right now? So much has happened... today is

the second day, right?"
"Yeah. Five more days?"
"That's how it works."
Kiyone nodded.
"What on earth is this Demon King? I don't quite understand. Until now there's just been one earth tremor and one monster. Still doesn't feel real..."
"Maybe he hasn't fully woken up yet?"
Mihoshi shrugged.
"You know how some people are just bad with mornings— They have low blood pressure."
"You're not talking about yourself are you."
Kiyone gave Mihoshi a shove and finally smiled.
"Next time you look serious, I'm calling you Wrinkle-Kiyo-chan."
"Then you're Carefree-Miho-chan."
Kiyone hopped lightly over a geyser of flame and struck a landing pose.
"Kiyone, you're so coooool!"
The prince and Pete, who had quietly come back and been watching the two of them banter, looked at each other and burst out laughing.
"Why don't you quit being heroes and become a comedy duo?"
"I'll pull doves out from under my robe or something."
Pete said with a grin and clapped his hands.
Instantly, small multi-colored doves appeared, singing the Hallelujah Chorus and vanished into the sky.
"Oh, Pete-san!"
Mihoshi clapped her hands in amazement.
"Amazing!"
"It's just an illusion."
Pete gave an embarrassed smile and got punched by the prince.
"Showing off because I can't use magic, are you!"
"Did I? There's a magic only the prince can use, isn't there?"
"Drop the subject!"
The prince visibly flustered and turned on his heel.
And then.
Suddenly the ground shook, and pillars of flame shot up from all around.
"Wh-what!?"

Groooooooar!

A roar like a thunderclap.

Cracks opened in the plateau and spread rapidly. Then something like black thorns pierced through the earth.

A spiny head swelled up and towered, about the height of a five-story building.

Of course behind the spiny head came a spiny torso, thick legs like a baobab tree, and a spiny tail.

"A Black Dragon!!"

Pete inhaled sharply.

"Stand back! I'll try something!"

Pete restrained the prince who had drawn his greatsword, and with a serious face began chanting a spell.

"O Earth, O sleeping mother Gaia, spread your great hands and pin what has awakened to the earth. Gravitation Hole!!"

The flames around the dragon were drawn in and shrunk, beginning to fade.

The ground started sinking, as if under overwhelming gravity.

The polished scales creaked, and the Black Dragon let out a roar of rage.

"Well done!"

And in the same breath the prince dashed forward.

He aimed straight at the soft underside of the dragon's belly, switching his sword to a reverse grip.

And then the dragon's neck craned with a grinding sound.

Cold amber eyes fixed on Pete, narrowing for a moment as if smiling.

In that instant, the spell's barrier broke and scattered.

"It’s resistance broke through!?"

Pete staggered. Almost simultaneously, the dragon swept one of its wings—which bore three enormous hooked talons.

"Kyaaaaaaa!"

The prince's body flew through the air and crashed to the ground with a horrible sound.

Mihoshi screamed and froze.

She couldn't move.

Every nerve in her body was screaming to run from this place.

"Prince!!"

A white figure sprinted past.

Kiyone.

"You'll pay for that——!"

Kiyone raised the Sword of Selene and slashed at the dragon's leg.

A crisp sound rang out and the blade was knocked back.

The dragon turned its head with an air of amusement and looked down at the small figure.

Its jaw opened, as if to mock her.

"Air Shield!!"

Pete cried out.

If it didn't work in time, Kiyone wouldn't even leave bones.

And then a tremendous torrential downpour fell as if a bucket had been upended.

The force was too much for the flames—they were snuffed out without a struggle, leaving the stunned Kiyone and Mihoshi and the dragon behind.

"Zaphiel!?"

Pete started running.

"MihoKiyo-san, quickly! Run!"

With every ounce of his strength he heaved up the prince, who looked like a tattered red rag.

"Hey, Pete..."

The prince groaned.

"...Get the women out of here quickly!"

"What are you saying!?"

Pete tried by force to pull the prince up, and froze.

His abdomen was gouged to the point where bone was visible, organs protruding.

It was a wonder he was alive.

"Guard the hero!!"

The prince whispered in a strangled voice.

"Prince Zaphiel!!"

MihoKiyo came running desperately.

The dragon's roar chased after them.

The fury in the air was palpable.

"Don't come here!! Run!"

Pete screamed.

At that moment.

"What d'you think you're doin', taking your time like that!?"

With a shout, a figure like a little demon appeared, grabbed MihoKiyo by the collar, and lifted them effortlessly.

"You lot just watch from over there!"

The figure—water-blue hair flying—dropped MihoKiyo beside Pete and appeared above the dragon's head.

"Want to go one on one?"

The absurdly well-proportioned little female demon—or was she a monster—launched herself high and rushed in like a gale.

Dooom!! CRACK!! THWOOM!!

Three-kick combo wrapped in lightning, continuous punches wrapped in flame—they pierced armor that a blade couldn't cut, crushing the internal structure.

Grr... GAAAAAAA!

Heartsease's strongest creature, the Black Dragon, left a dying roar and crashed to the ground with a thunderous boom.

"...Hmph!"

The airborne female fighter who had downed the dragon in barely five seconds vanished and appeared in front of the dumbfounded Pete.

"Ryoko-san!?"

"Oh hey, it's MihoKiyo. Didn't recognize you in those outfits."

"Ryoko-saaaan!!"

MihoKiyo embraced her and burst into tears. Ryoko scratched up her water-blue hair in bewilderment.

"What an Ideal woman..."

The prince smiled and closed his eyes.

Like a tide going out, the life force drained from him.

"Zaphiel!?"

Pete lost his head and shook the prince, then suddenly remembered and yanked Freya's ring off.

"I forgot... if I had used this sooner..."

The ring's healing had already activated after the prince's soul had departed.

"Prince...?"

Mihoshi's eyes grew wet.

And then a silver crescent moon rose on the prince's forehead.

The horrific wounds were enveloped in light and closed as if by magic.
The prince's entire body was bathed in silver-white light.
The pallor returned to warm color on his cheeks, and his lips parted, searching for breath.
"Hm...!?"
The prince slowly sat up and looked around.
"Did I just... not die?"
"Zaphiel!!"
"A miracle!!"
Pete wept with joy and threw himself around Zaphiel's neck in tears. MihoKiyo involuntarily clapped their hands.
"So... that was Freya's gift..."
The prince gave a quiet smile, patted Pete's arm soothingly, and stood.
"Zaphiel, that magic was incredible."
The prince's muttered words went unheard by Pete, who beamed.
"You've even leveled up to a downpour!"
"Is that rainstorm the one that put out the flames?"
"Yes—the prince's one and only magic spell."
Pete nodded at Mihoshi.
"He shouts his own name. Zaphiel. It means sudden shower."
"I was going to take it to my grave without anyone ever knowing."
The prince grumbled.
"If not for that rain, I would be dead."
Kiyone stepped up to the prince and gripped his hand firmly.
"Thank you, Prince. You are the true hero."
"Give the thanks to her. Heartsease's strongest warrior."
The prince stepped in front of Ryoko, laid his hand on his chest, and bowed in courtly fashion.
"I have never seen a warrior as strong as you. Will you fight alongside us?"
Ryoko looked the handsome prince up and down with arms folded.
"Hmm... I'd say yes, but right now I'm looking for someone."
"For Washu-san?"
"You're looking for Washu!? That stupid idiot is in the Hermit's Forest."
Ryoko raised her eyebrows and spat.
"The one I'm looking for is Tenchi."
MihoKiyo involuntarily looked at each other.

# Level 8:

# What the Heck Are You People Here For

"What the heck are you people here for?"

Ryoko sat up from a pile of cushions, golden goblet in hand.

Sleeping curled up contentedly nearby was, unmistakably, Ryo-ohki.

Though the Ryo-ohki who had been the size of a rabbit had grown to the size of a Bengal tiger, showing her pure white fangs from her mouth—aside from that.

This was the fortress of bandits midway up Flame Mountain, and the room MihoKiyo was in was one of its chambers.

Luxurious carpets were laid wall to wall, and in the four corners of the room mountains of gold and silver treasure overflowed from treasure chests—a world straight out of illustrated Arabian Nights.

"What do I mean, what are we 'here for'—I want to ask you that!"

Kiyone looked up from the mountain of dishes she'd been picking at modestly.

"What are you doing here, Ryoko-san? You have your memories and yet you're working as the boss of a bandit gang? I was dropped into this world without warning, you know. It was so lonely and scary getting here, I nearly cried."

"Yeah, right."

Mihoshi muttered under her breath.

"You were pretty into it."

Kiyone wrinkled her brows but decided to ignore it and brushed crumbs off her silver armor.

"I'm just me."

Ryoko said casually, drained her goblet, and poured her ninth drink.

"Happened to find myself spinning a great big reclining moon blade and lopping off

someone's head."

Ryoko spread her arms wide. A chill ran down Kiyone's spine.

"The world here is pretty nice when you live in it. All the booze you can drink, all the treasure you can take, annoying Ayeka isn't around, and Washu isn't either. Ryo-ohki is here too, and if Tenchi were around it'd be perfect, but that Tenchi can't be found anywhere."

A leather bikini-type armor with a vivid blue mantle thrown over it, leather protectors at wrist and ankle—the high-exposure outfit looked so natural on Ryoko it seemed she must be a native of this world.

The prince's eyes were glued to her cleavage and not budging—whether or not she was aware of it, Ryoko casually stuck a finger into her bikini top and fanned herself with a feather fan.

"You people—do you really want to go back to the Masaki house that badly?"

For a moment Kiyone was caught off guard and fell silent.

"What are you saying! Of course! Ryoko-san, this world is going to be destroyed in five more days. The Demon King is going to come out and catastrophes will occur. We just had a run-in with a Black Dragon and nearly died. I don't know much about fantasy or game worlds, but the Demon King is the final boss, right? Dozens of times stronger than the Black Dragon, right? I..."

Kiyone barely swallowed her next words.

Right now, Kiyone is Hero Kiyone.

Who has already made big declarations in front of King Shamsiel and Prince Zaphiel.

"In other words, you're scared."

Ryoko smirked.

"Well, can't help it. This world suits me better, if you want to know. Those without power get the short end here."

Ryoko put her goblet down and stood.

"If you're expecting me to do something about the Demon King or save the world—let me be clear: if I find Tenchi, that's enough for me. I was a pirate to begin with."

"That's a problem!!"

Suddenly the prince stood.

"Ryoko, you're a warrior. What is a life without fighting? I don't know about Tenchi or what, but I can't imagine a man whose name has never even been heard of in Heartsease is good enough for you. Come with us. Fight by my side! Together we can defeat the Demon King. Let's build a new world with our love!"

"...Huh!?"

Ryoko nearly fell over.

The prince's blond hair had faded in the heat and wind, looking almost a sandy white now.

"Ryoko! Say yes. Please!!"

Ryoko furrowed her brow and stared at the prince's face.

This guy... this disregard for context, this one-minded way of speaking...

"What's your name again? Tie this around your head for a sec."

Ryoko threw the red scarf tied around her own head.

She watched the prince tie it awkwardly and her expression only grew more intense.

"Do you happen to have a relative called Seiran?"

"Seiran?"

"Who's that?"

MihoKiyo exchanged glances.

"Never mind, just talking."

Ryoko muttered with a displeased look.

Not my problem, it's really a different conversation.

Watching the prince, who now looked more and more like Seiran with the red scarf—she really meant bandana—Ryoko thought.

"I Changed my mind. Give that back."

She tried to grab it back roughly.

"No!"

It was grabbed back.

"In twenty-nine years as a prince, I always felt something was missing. Now I understand what it was. What I lacked was you and this red bandana!!"

The moment it was declared, he furrowed his brows.

"Bandana?"

The prince stared closely at the red scarf, then with a more practiced motion tied it on his head.

"I almost remember something. Stars... the night sky... a ship?"

The prince closed his eyes with a finger on the scarf, and his expression became nearly indistinguishable from Seiran's.

"Don't play word-association games!!"

Ryoko interrupted the prince's meditation with a pounding heart.

I threw that seven hundred years ago into the sea of stars along with the memories of being a space pirate.

"Aren't you some kind of prince or something!? What happened to the fight?"

"Right."

The prince opened his eyes as if waking.

"Just now I felt like I glimpsed another life. You're a strange woman."

The prince started to take the scarf off reluctantly.

"You... want this back, right?"

"Changed my mind. You can have it. Um..."

"Zaphiel. Occupation: prince."

"Then, Prince. Protect these guys properly. Let's go, Ryo-ohki."

Ryoko lightly tapped Ryo-ohki's side with the tip of her foot.

"Myaan!?"

MihoKiyo nearly fell face-first into the dishes.

"Ryo-ohki-chan's voice hasn't changed."

"Myau?"

Ryo-ohki tilted her large head in puzzlement and looked back at Mihoshi.

"Myau... this kid, how did she get so big? She's not going to turn into a spaceship, is she?"

"I was kind of hoping for that too."

Ryoko stroked Ryo-ohki's head with a 'there, there.'

"Hear this. This girl—she's got wings and she can fly!"

MihoKiyo toppled over onto the cushions.

"W-well, I kind of guessed..."

"Flying Ryo-ohki."

"Myaaaaaaan♡"

Ryo-ohki tangled around Ryoko's feet and stared up at her face beseechingly, as if begging for something.

"Again? You, carrots are precious in this world. It's not like I can just nip out to the greengrocer and get some. Nobekooo!"

Ryoko called out through the door.

"Bring carrots. Ryo-ohki's hungry!"

"Coming right up!"

A familiar-sounding voice came from outside. A short while later a henchman poked his head in.

"Unfortunately the supply team has run out... terribly sorry."

The man—leather vest, baggy trousers cinched with a wide belt, a minor-official's blank face under a brimless hat—pressed his forehead to the carpet the moment he saw Ryoko's face.

"Section Chief Nobeyama!?"
"Hmm? What are you talking about?"
The bandit who looked exactly like MihoKiyo's boss looked at them quizzically.
"You dummy! You're completely useless!"
Ryoko hit her henchman and Nobeko bowed with his head in his hands.
"Hurry up and go to town and buy some! Wait—"

Ryoko looked back with something in mind and yanked Mihoshi's ponytail up.
"Forget I mentioned you, Mihoshi. Come on, we're shopping. Booze and carrots and Tenchi!"
"What are you doing!? Tenchi-san isn't for sale!"
Mihoshi put her hands on her head, tearing up as she asked back.
"Don't play dumb. You're a detective, right? We're going to find Tenchi!"
Ryoko grabbed Mihoshi by the collar and purred sweetly.
"I helped you just now, didn't I. Finding Tenchi beats the Demon King, doesn't it. You want to search for Tenchi with me, don't you?"
"Ugh..."
Mihoshi was about to shake her head in fright.
At that moment.
"Boss!"
A voice came from outside the door.
"A distress signal's gone up from the expedition team! Looks like there's been some trouble."
"Tch."
Ryoko clicked her tongue and let go.
"Talk later. Later."
Ryoko left with Ryo-ohki, and didn't come back all that day.

In the end, the now five-strong party including MihoKiyo, the prince, Pete, and Ryoko and Ryo-ohki, passed through the desert gate the following afternoon and emerged beside a large lake.
This was the resort town of Grace, a town of smart restaurants and pensions lined along the inlet of the so-called Lake of Grace.
A luxury resort bustling all year round.
A breeze from the lake was pleasantly cool, ribbons of ladies lingering there

fluttered, and lovers whispered sweet nothings at café terraces—it was just that kind of fashionable town.

"Wooooow! Ice cream! Cheese cake blueberry sauce! Mille-feuille fraise!!"

Mihoshi, who had been plastered to the menu displayed outside a southern European-style café terrace surrounded by geranium pots, broke free of Kiyone's hand and ran into the shop with a cheer.

"Miho—Mihoshi!!"

"Kiyone-chan, over here, over here!"

Mihoshi had already grabbed the best seat by the window overlooking the lake and was waving cheerfully.

"I'll take a large chocolate parfait. And carrots for this one."

"I'll have cherry pie and coffee."

"I'll have... let me see... herbal tea."

Ryoko and the others who'd come flooding in behind Kiyone promptly sat down and started placing orders.

"Excuse me, ma'am. I'll bring you a chair right away."

The waitress in black dress and white apron smiled kindly at Kiyone who'd been left without a seat.

"Oh, no, I'm fine here."

Sulking, Kiyone sat at the next table and ordered espresso.

"aaah..."

A sigh escaped her involuntarily.

"I wonder what on earth I'm doing."

She had to find Washu as soon as possible, the person said to be in the Hermit's Forest.

And she had to defeat the Demon King, and find Tenchi and Sasami.

"This is no time to be sitting here having tea!"

Kiyone unconsciously clenched her fist and made customers at nearby tables frown.

"Kiyone-chan, what? Aren't you eating cake?"

"Kiyone-san, would you like my seat? I can move."

The nicely paired Mihoshi and Pete turned from the other table.

"No, Pete-san. How thoughtful."

Kiyone returned a smile, the corner of her mouth twitching slightly.

Twinkling eyes, rosy cheeks—surely her heart was full and all she could manage was the herbal tea.

Kiyone couldn't quite grasp why a wizard had fallen for a first-class Galaxy Police

detective, but she wasn't mean enough to interfere in someone's love.

As for Ryoko—she sat cross-legged on her chair, with Ryo-ohki at her feet, having also helped herself to the prince's cherry pie, sprawling and lording it over everyone.

The prince watched his order vanish into Ryoko's mouth with an expression of supreme delight.

He'd surely happily lick the plate clean if told to.

"Haaa..."

Kiyone sighed for the second time.

Life is empty.

Sugar-free coffee is bitter.

The waitress had forgotten to bring the sugar bowl, and also forgotten the milk.

I should have changed into that one-piece rather than the armor.

Kiyone looked down at her silver armor that seemed so out of place.

The waitress didn't seem particularly bothered, but Kiyone felt she was the only one floating in the shop, and she felt sad.

This armor doesn't suit me at all.

I shouldn't have called myself a hero.

In this getup, if I don't rescue a princess or something, I can't back down.

Kiyone slumped and turned her gaze to the lake.

She could see a white cruise ship sliding silently across the lake's surface.

Absent-mindedly following the ship with her eyes, Kiyone felt a sudden chill and looked back with a start.

At the diagonal table from Kiyone sat a young man in black, staring at Kiyone with freezing eyes.

The man looked a little younger than Kiyone.

Translucent white skin with a blue tinge, jet-black hair, dark purple eyes, and thin, pressed lips.

An angelic beauty combined with a dead-cold chill.

And then the man smiled.

Like a ray of light splitting dark clouds, the smile softened the shadow of the man.

Kiyone felt a rush of heat in her chest, then averted her gaze in a fluster.

She couldn't stare at him.

A detective's—or perhaps a woman's—instinct had sensed danger instinctively.

"Excuse me."

A soft voice whispered.

"Would it be all right if I joined you?"

Without waiting for Kiyone's answer, the man sat down with a silken sound of rustling cloth.

Seeing the man's face up close, Kiyone felt her breath stop.

Such was the beauty of it.

"What is your name?"

"Kiyone..."

Kiyone murmured with a voice that felt as if numb to the core, and peered into the man's eyes.

The rustle of voices in the shop retreated at the speed of light, and even the warmth of the sunlight seemed to be swallowed into darkness.

In the dark, the man quietly took Kiyone's hand.

"A lovely name. Befitting your purity."

The man smiled.

In the dark it was as if only that spot had lit up with a gentle glow.

"My name is—"

"Prince!!"

The surroundings suddenly grew bright, and Kiyone swayed dizzily and shook her head.

"This is a problem. Please don't wander around without permission."

"Stand back!"

Startled by the fierce tone, Kiyone looked up—and saw a shadow-like figure crowded beside the man.

"Please return to the castle."

The armored warrior-like shadow threatened and flickered, then vanished abruptly.

"We shall meet again. Pure female warrior."

The man called Prince gave Kiyone a lonely sidelong glance and quickly left the shop.

No matter how hard Kiyone strained her eyes through the open window, she couldn't spot the man who should have just left.

"What happened, Kiyone-chan?"

"Just now..."

Kiyone turned around.

"A man... wearing a black shirt, black hair..."

Mihoshi looked at Kiyone blankly and glanced outside the window.

"Kiyone-chan, you were alone the whole time. I kept sneaking looks because I thought you seemed bad, Kiyone-chan. You had such a gloomy face I thought you were going to throw yourself in the lake."

"Why on earth would I throw myself in the lake!?"
"Sorry♡"
Mihoshi's eyes sparkled with stars.
"I was no help to you at all, Kiyone-chan. You must have been lonely. You could have come over here and eaten cake. You must have been having some kind of bad dream. It's okay now. I'll ride the cruise ship with you."
"Who said anything about a cruise ship?"
"Because you were staring at it so hard."
Mihoshi sighed with regret looking at the lake surface shining in the afternoon sun.
"Today's about done, it looks like. Let's go to the dock tomorrow morning. Oh?"
Mihoshi leaned out the window.
"Tenchi-saaaan!"
"What!? Tenchi!?"
Ryoko rushed to the window.
"Look over there. By the dock—he's trudging along, right? With something like a basket. Tenchi-saaa——n"
Mihoshi waved her hand big over the window frame, and Ryoko and Ryo-ohki leaped over it.
"Ryoko!"
The prince and Pete followed, and Mihoshi was escorted out by Pete and jumped daintily down from the window frame.
"Wait—me too..."
Someone grabbed her shoulder hard.
"Ma'am, the bill is over here."
The waitress smiled and pointed to the register.
"With consumption tax, that comes to three hundred thirty-nine gold in total."
After paying the bill out of the five hundred gold the prince had given her, and by the time Kiyone left the shop, the four and one had already surrounded Tenchi and were saying all manner of things.

This was some time after Kiyone had gone out.
A woman came hobbling as if her leg hurt to the café terrace, wrapped in a plain gray mantle.
"Excuse me, I am looking for someone."
When the woman produced an illustration of Prince Zaphiel from under her mantle, the waitress smiled and nodded.

"That person was here until just a little while ago. I believe he's staying somewhere in this town."

The woman bowed politely. Under her mantle peeked a pure white robe, and from under the deep hood, lustrous black hair slid out.

"Could you be... Lady Freya...?"

The woman startled, gathered her mantle around her, and hurried from the shop as if frightened by something.

# Level 9:

# Carrots, Would You Like Some?

"Carrots, would you like some?"

Tenchi, with a strangely bright face, produced magnificent leafy carrots in front of Ryoko.

"Sweet and delicious carrots. I'm the world's greatest carrot grower."

Ryoko opened her eyes wide and didn't reach out. Tenchi had offered carrots one by one to each of the remaining three as well, and when he sighed and was about to put the carrots back in the basket—

"Tenchi!!"

Ryoko grabbed Tenchi by the collar and shook him vigorously.

"What happened to you!! Have you forgotten my face—Ryoko's face!?"

"Would you like some carrots?"

Tenchi kept smiling and offered a carrot while being shaken.

"Myaan!"

Finally unable to hold back, Ryo-ohki pounced on the carrot and began crunching away with her front teeth—easily dozens of times the size of a rabbit's.

Ryo-ohki's face lit up.

So moved she had tears in her eyes.

"Myamyamyamyamya!!"

Ryo-ohki firmly inserted herself between Ryoko and Tenchi, reared up on her front legs, and stared up at Tenchi with earnest, pleading eyes.

"Carrot...!"

Tenchi happily produced another carrot from the basket.

He nervously placed it in Ryo-ohki's carnivore mouth.

"Myaa♡"

Ryo-ohki's whole body trembled with joy and her face went melty.

"Carrot!"

"Myaa♡"

"Carrot!!"

"Myamyaa♡"

After that it was just this repeated.

"Stop it You——"

Ryoko suddenly smacked Ryo-ohki on the head.

"Mya!?"

She stepped on Ryo-ohki, till she wss flattened on the ground and seized Tenchi's face in both hands.

"Tenchi, what on earth happened to you!? Have you forgotten ME? The RYOKO? Look—this hair. This mouth. Do you remember? Ryoko. Here, does it ring a bell? Hey, look at this area—don't you feel a ticktock? This burning something deep in my chest, these trembling heartbeats—they're crying for you!"

Ryoko guided Tenchi's hand toward her chest, bulging out of her bikini.

"Ryoko!"

The prince, about to burst out in fury, had his mantle desperately pinned by Mihoshi, who whispered:

"Tenchi-san is acting strange..."

"Carrot..."

Tenchi shook his head in a frightened gesture, as if saying no.

"...Don't you want any?"

BWAM...!!

"What does 'carrot' have to do with anything!?"

Ryoko, who had knocked Tenchi flat on the dock planks, shook her fist with an unbearable feeling, and screamed.

"Ohhh!?"

A rumble rose from the crowd.

"Oh dear..."

On either side of the dock, a crowd of gawkers had gathered before anyone knew, and Kiyone, arriving late, clutched her head in the shadow of the crowd.

And then—

"Violence will not be tolerated!!"

A gray figure strode briskly from the crowd, pointed sharply at Ryoko.

"What kind of reasoning is there in beating an innocent peddler and robbing him? Zaphiel, I am appalled you would participate in such villainy. I have lost my faith in you!"

The small gray figure flung back her hood.

Lustrous black hair slid down her back.

"Freya!?"

"Ayeka!?"

The prince and Ryoko cried out simultaneously.

"Divine judgment will fall on those who commit evil!"

Freya, a.k.a Ayeka, spread her hands and began murmuring incantation words.

"Shut up, you stupid Ayeka! Go disappear somewhere!!"

Ryoko smoothly drew her reclining blade.

At that voice, Tenchi regained consciousness.

"Carrot...!?"

"Stop!!"

Kiyone burst through the crowd.

"Hey, what are you doing!? You're going to be late for the reservation. Hurry! Tenchi-san, get up too! Come on, everyone, let's go!"

Chasing them all like a white gust of wind, Kiyone snatched Mihoshi's hand, pushed through the crowd, and broke out into a run.

"Reservation? Kiyo-chan, what reservation?"

"Myamyan!"

"Wait for me, Kiyone-san!"

"Carrot..."

Running along behind Kiyone was now the full party of seven plus one—the adventurers.

"We're safe from here..."

Kiyone stopped in front of a single isolated inn.

She was breathing hard.

"Starting a fight in front of a crowd like that—what kind of reasoning is that? Ayeka-san, this is not the Masaki living room. What on earth, you people—you think you can have a killing match all the way out here!?"

"Moon Priestesses do not take lives."

Freya, alias Ayeka, cast an icy glance.

"It is the hero herself who is in such a place as this. The hand of the Demon King has already reached this far. I came here... seeking rescue. And then—to see such lawless people you have allied with!"

"The Demon King's hand!? Ayeka, what kind of nonsense are you talking about?"

"I am not acquainted with anyone named Ayeka! Please address me as Moon Priestess Freya!"

Ayeka—no, Freya—glared at Ryoko with fury-burning eyes.

"What!?"
"Freya! What happened? What do you mean by the Demon King's hand?"
"Zaphiel."
Ayeka turned slowly to face the prince.
"The Moon Valley was attacked."

At that same time, deep in the underground labyrinth, in the Demon King's lair lying like a tomb, a beautiful young man in all black was pacing irritably.
"Prince Azrael, please calm yourself! This is the third day already. We have to destroy the world in four more days… what is Your Highness doing!?"
"Quiet!!"
The young prince called Azrael glared at Liargus with a fearsome expression.
If Liargus's skeleton form made him a strategic advisor of the demon realm, then Liargus—a kindred type—was something like the demon realm's scholar.
In a certain game, he appears wearing a Greek-style toga and carrying a stone tablet, but this Liargus wore a black gown like a university professor and carried a thick book.
"The destruction of the world is of no concern to me! Let someone wake Father and have him do it. In the first place—what is the point of destroying this beautiful Heartsease? If humans die out, we demons will starve and perish too. It is because this world flourishes, full of purity and joy, with souls born anew in abundance, that we demons savor the pleasure of corrupting them, dyeing them with fear, and feasting on them. A chicken that lays golden eggs is only valuable while kept alive. It makes no sense to wring its neck and kill it!"
The prince, having delivered his lengthy speech, picked up a goblet from the side table and drained it in one go.
The wet lips gleamed as if they'd drunk blood.
"But, Your Highness!"
Liargus was not outdone.
"What will you do with the forces that have gathered under the name of Azrael? This underground labyrinth is crawling with demons with nothing to do. Too much idle time has them quarreling with each other, killing each other, drinking themselves senseless, making children in the shadows, the lower-class demons multiply and cover the walls. And some even find this amusing—smearing it all over themselves, rolling around like pigs, tearing and rolling and stacking it, having their essence drained by succubi, lopping off each other's heads and throwing them..."
"Send them all back to the demon realm!!"

Azrael flung his goblet.

Liargus swiftly jumped aside. The prince's pale forehead showed swelling veins.

"I did not summon them! You yourselves called them together. I prefer to quietly watch the world pass from the lakeshore. And at night I go door to door, marking souls and guiding them to the dark path. From the time I gained awareness, that is how I have lived. Being forced into barbaric behavior just because a hero has appeared—I will not stand for it!!"

"You're just going around ogling young, pretty women."

Liargus picked up the fallen book and muttered.

"As long as the great Demon King Nergal has not awakened, it is only natural that Your Highness would take command. And yet—you won't look in the crystal ball. Won't read the plans. Won't hear reports. The heroes have already reached the lakeshore! And what have we done? Sent out only one Night Stalker and one Black Dragon! At this rate, the authority of this Dark Fort—the source of all terror—will crumble with time. From what I have seen so far, the heroes are formidable. Tonight let us release the demons. Plunge the world into terror, make the humans tremble!"

"You will not!!"

Azrael shouted.

"Once heroes enter this labyrinth, they cannot live a moment. I need only the troublesome heroes to perish. That is enough for me. Enough—begone! I am tired of looking at your skull face."

"I am Your Highness's guardian! Since the time I held the young prince in these arms, I have watched over you to become worthy of being the Demon Prince. Think of your great father! Of Nergal, who ruled the dark age with blood and terror and great power. Today's young prince is far too feeble! Even now, if you would look into the crystal ball, you would see the heroes approaching in full health!"

"Liargus."

Azrael brought the grim beauty of his face close to the hollow eye sockets of his loyal subject.

"Say one more word and I'll stuff you in a bone urn along with that gown. Go."

"...My apologies."

Liargus sighed, and went out looking back again and again.

Alone, the prince paced the great hall in irritation, then sank into the ivory throne carved with dragons and skulls.

A deep sigh escaped his lips.

"Why do they drive me? Why can they not leave me be? I love beautiful things. I love to love beautiful things just as they are, beautiful. Let the barbaric beasts handle

warfare. Gods of Heartsease—why do you thwart me!?"

A woman's image floated suddenly into his mind.

A human woman in silver armor, with clear eyes containing a tinge of sadness.

He wanted to see that face again.

She must still be at the lakeside town.

Standing on the magic circle drawn in the center of the cold great hall, Azrael began chanting a transfer spell.

"Kiyone, was it?"

The prince stopped his chant midway and murmured.

Where had she gotten that silver armor?

Was it from Moon Valley?

Had she gone to Freya the priestess and received a blessing?

"Liargus!"

Forgetting that he had just told him to leave, Azrael raised his voice.

The hall was quiet, and only the flames of the candelabra flickered.

It seemed Liargus had really gone somewhere.

Probably on his rounds of the labyrinth.

Azrael lightly clicked his tongue and picked up a report left scattered on the large rosewood table.

Flipping through it only perfunctorily, it was a report he had looked at not even once.

8th month, a hero appears in the Field of Departure.

Otherworlder passes through the Gate of the Sun and has an audience with the king of the Golden Castle.

Anomaly detected in the prophetic tapestry.

Starting there, the report detailed that Prince Zaphiel of the Golden Castle had joined, that the hero had companions, that a wizard had joined and they were heading toward Moon Valley.

"Dark-haired female hero... name Kiyone... Kiyone!?"

The report contained the secret ritual passed down in Moon Valley.

Three blessings said to be bestowed when the hero appeared... the silver armor, the Sword of Selene, and the kiss of a maiden.

Azrael threw the report aside, grabbed the cover of the crystal ball, and hurled it to the floor.

The interior of the crystal, where white mist had been swirling, gradually cleared

from its center, and against images of Prince Zaphiel and Freya the priestess, the silver-armored figure that caught the eye most vividly appeared.

On her back was without doubt the Sword of Selene.

"Three blessings...!"

Azrael stumbled involuntarily.

"...Was she the hero!?"

The crystal's Kiyone was just disappearing into a single inn, leading the other six companions.

# Level 10:

# Tenchi, Listen Carefully

"Tenchi-san, listen carefully!"

After Ryoko's fists had done the talking to clear a sweet suite for them, Kiyone sat Tenchi on the sofa and pointed at Ryoko and Ayeka in a line-up.

"It's Ryoko-san. And Ayeka-san. Do you really not remember?"

Tenchi sat looking blankly up at Kiyone and shook his head vaguely.

"Don't you remember me? Mihoshi? Ryo-ohki? Everyone?"

"I suppose you may be seated now."

Without waiting for a reply, Ayeka turned on her heel, went to the table in the back, and sat across from Zaphiel.

"Ayeka-san!"

"It is Freya!"

An angry reply came back.

"What on earth happened? Why won't their memories return? This way, both of them will become people of this world. Mihoshi—you came back to yourself so easily."

"I think the more serious a person is, the more they get into character? Tenchi-san and Ayeka-san are both serious, so..."

"Are you saying I'm not serious?"

Ryoko pointed a fist with one middle finger at Mihoshi.

"T-that's not what anyone said..."

At the back table, Ayeka with recovered memories had the prince and Pete before her and was explaining last night's events with a furrowed brow.

"So the monsters that attacked Moon Valley were the same as the ones that attacked you when you came?"

"Yes... identical. Hundreds of them... An armored, darkness-incarnate commander led the monsters. We used protection prayer barriers but they were broken through by that man... after that it was the demons' domain. Half the valley was killed... I hid under the concealment cloak and barely slipped through the gate."

"Freya."

The prince placed his hand on Ayeka's shoulder—she had hidden her face—and was silent for a moment.

"I'm sorry. If I had stayed, you..."

"No, Zaphiel. It was I who was wrong. I should have left on the journey with you as you said... if I had, the people of the valley need not have lost their lives..."

"It would be the work of Demon King Nergal's servants."

Pete muttered with a troubled face.

"The stories of the dark age are, in fact, not well known. What Demon King Nergal looked like, how large the Demon King's armies were... since Demon King Nergal was sealed by Mingler Chaos and fell into a long sleep, it is said that the dragons and monsters and shadow-dwelling demon creatures lost their original power. They are threats, but not enough to threaten the world. You could say there is a balance. But apparently the balance has been broken. The final days are truly approaching... and I imagine such massacres have begun in many places around the world."

"I can’t believe such things..."

Before anyone noticed, Kiyone had been standing behind Pete, listening carefully.

"I'm sorry. I should have told you sooner."

Pete turned to face the silent group.

"I was confused myself. So many things happened... the journey this far was enjoyable... we had frightening experiences too..."

"Everyone's the same."

Kiyone smiled in comfort.

"We've met, all of us. And we somehow made it this far. All that's left is 'Onward to the Demon King's Castle!' We'll work through each obstacle one at a time."

"Kiyo-chan, that catchphrase is pretty cool."

"Of course. I'm the hero."

"...Hmph!"

Ryoko tugged irritably at her water-blue hair and glanced at Tenchi, who was mindlessly stroking Ryo-ohki.

"What are you doing playing around... Tenchi matters more, right?"

Just then.

BOOOOOM!!

The door blew off in a fiery explosion.

With horrible screams, a swarm of strange demons burst in.

"A surprise attack!"

Night had crept up unnoticed. The room was immediately filled with screams, the clash of swords, the sounds of things breaking.

"Eeeee, don't come near me!!"

"Mihoshi!"

Kiyone brought the glowing Sword of Selene down with full force, cutting down the orc that had been about to pounce on Mihoshi.

At that instant a sharp pain shot through her left arm.

A zombie's severed head (?) was latched onto it with teeth.

Apparently Ryoko had scored a critical hit.

A burst of light flashed from a corner of the room.

"Oh mother Selene! Return the tainted souls to the earth, and cleanse the evil miasma!!"

That was Ayeka's voice—sounding like she was about to have a hysteria attack.

"O spirit of flame, Ifreet! Grant me power with your sacred flame that burns away impure flesh!"

A rush of magical flame whirled up and the Night Stalkers screamed.

"GORYAAAAAAA!!"

Zaphiel was joyfully swinging his two-handed greatsword one-handed.

"This one! This one! This one! This one!"

Mihoshi was smashing zombie heads with a nearby vase, and Kiyone clutched the Sword of Selene and frantically swept her gaze around the room.

"Tenchi-san!"

Tenchi had been cornered by a drooling werewolf and was trembling, eyes wide.

"Myaaaaan!"

Suddenly a thick paw stepped on the wolf's back.

"Myan!"

Ryo-ohki grabbed the wolf's neck in her teeth and threw it up to the ceiling, then began rubbing against the half-dazed Tenchi.

"Damn it, they just keep coming! Ryo-ohki, take Tenchi and run!"

Ryoko shouted at Ryo-ohki while swinging her crescent blade, then threw down the blunted blade and started fighting bare-handed.

"Myaaaaaaan!!"

Ryo-ohki lowered her head and gathered strength.

The area below her shoulder blades swelled, and pure white wings like an angel's appeared.

"Ryo... Ryo-ohki-chan?"

"Myamyan!"

Ryo-ohki cried out proudly at Kiyone, tossed the stunned Tenchi onto her back, and burst out the shattered window.

"Let's go!"

Ryoko followed right after.

Fortunately the room was on the first floor, so MihoKiyo and Ayeka and the others jumped out the window without breaking or spraining anything.

"Why do we have to go through all this!?"

Mihoshi looked back while running desperately down the road.

"I don't know! Keep looking forward or you'll trip!"

"Oh, Ryo-ohki-chan looks like a Pegasus. Look, she's really flying... Ah!?"

Mihoshi, who'd been on the verge of face-planting into the gravel, was caught by Pete who'd just caught up.

"I told you to run forward."

"The gate is right there. Hurry!"

A short ways along, near where a small stream flowed into the Lake of Grace, a rainbow-colored gate stood quietly.

The moment Ryo-ohki touched down before the gate, the wings on her back disappeared.

"Tenchi, are you okay?"

Ryoko had been waiting and lifted Tenchi down.

"This gate?"

Kiyone demanded, out of breath, racing up.

"Where else? It’s where Washu is. Whether we can see her is the question."

"The question!?"

Suddenly a dark shadow-like figure blocked Kiyone's path.

The recovered Ayeka and Zaphiel stopped in surprise.

"Are you the hero?"

The armored shadow-figure addressed Kiyone in a muffled voice.

"Then die here!!"

A blue-white scythe sliced through the air and came down.

"Who are you!?"

Kiyone barely leapt clear and drew the Sword of Selene.

"No need to give a name."
The man's voice seemed to carry the faintest trace of laughter.
"Come forth, creatures of shadow!"
A rush of darkness swirled and monsters poured out one after another.
"Oh mother Selene. Return the tainted souls to earth, cleanse the evil miasma!"
A dazzling light burst.
The shadow staggered as if startled, raising an arm to cover its eyes.
"Run, Kiyone!"
Mihoshi flew in and grabbed Kiyone's arm.
"B-but that was the Demon King's..."
"Doesn't matter!"
Mihoshi dragged Kiyone and plunged into the gate. One by one everyone passed through and disappeared.
"Was that the thing Ayeka-san mentioned?"
"It is Freya!"
Tumbling out of the gate in a clump, Kiyone and the others stared blankly around.
A gate stood alone in a small clearing of a dark, dense forest.
"Oh..."
Ayeka's expression softened.
"The forest's scent. Something nostalgic..."
"Waaaah, I was so scared!"
Mihoshi, tearful, was being comforted while Kiyone glanced back at the gate.
"No pursuit... it seems."
"Did that man say anything?"
Pete hitched up his tattered black robe and came over.
"He never even gave his name. But he was definitely targeting me."
Kiyone wrinkled her brow and looked down at her silver armor.
Slippery, sticky with zombie saliva and bodily fluids—but not a single scratch.
Without this armor, things would have been far worse—no doubt about it.
"That's a demon. Definitely. Freya, are you hurt?"
Zaphiel, who had been watching the surrounding darkness alertly, came back.
"...Honestly, we're suffering thanks to someone's hero game."
Ryoko came over with an annoyed look, leaving Tenchi to Ryo-ohki.
"Kiyone! Washu is in the depths of this forest. But it's dark today and I'm done. I'm going to sleep—everyone do what they want."
That was all she came to say. Ryoko went back to Tenchi's side.

When morning came, it turned out everyone had fallen asleep beside the gate.

Morning, though—in the dense forest it was dim.

"What day is it?"

"Hm?"

"Wait, how many days has it been?"

"Uhh... the fourth day?"

Mihoshi was counting on her fingers, but looked at Kiyone's face and suddenly teared up.

"Kiyone-chan, I'm hungry. My back hurts. The place I got hurt yesterday hurts too. My hands feel sticky. I want to go home."

"Stop acting like a child!"

The moment Kiyone stood up she got dizzy and crouched back down.

...I've had nothing but a single cup of coffee today.

She wiped at the silver armor's dirt with her bare hands in a fit of spite, then rubbed her hands on the undergrowth.

"This is what adventure is. It's not much different from our normal missions."

"Ugh..."

While pulling up the teary-eyed Mihoshi, Kiyone whispered in her ear.

"The painful adventure is nearly over. If we find Washu-san and defeat the Demon King, we can return to our real world. Now pull yourself together!"

The group—having left most of their belongings at the inn—set out in ragged, filthy attire along a small path stretching into the forest.

The path looped through the forest and brought them right back to the gate.

"Of course."

Ryoko clicked her tongue and this time stepped off the path into the woods.

Almost immediately dense shrubs and vines blocked the way, and progress slowed to a crawl.

After a long struggle they came out into an open area—and it was the same clearing with the gate.

"Damn."

Ryoko swore and started going in the opposite direction.

A path was found, and following it, the gate appeared again.

"Hey!! You stupid crabhead Washu!!"

Ryoko clenched her fist and bellowed in a voice that could shake the forest.

"If you mess with us any more I'm going to blast the whole forest away with a shockwave!!"

The forest was perfectly still.

"What exactly is happening?"

Ayeka lowered her voice and asked the prince beside her.

"Hard to say..."

The prince was gazing blissfully at Ryoko's back with her fist raised.

Even now, it seems the prince's love was burning away on its own.

"Carrot field, gotta go."

Tenchi, who had been quietly following after Ryoko, murmured softly.

"Do what you like!"

Ayeka snapped in an oddly angry tone and stalked away from Zaphiel's side, glaring at the unremarkable forest path.

"Hey, that Ryoko person. I will find the true path with my prayer. Step aside!"

Clasping both hands and closing her eyes.

"Oh mother Selene, dispel the false illusion, and show me the true form!"

Nothing happened.

"It's no use. This forest appears to have a barrier that nullifies spells."

Pete showed Mihoshi a candle that had gone dark.

"I just tried a moment ago—matches seem more useful."

"I wonder if Washu-san is really here."

Mihoshi, with a muddy nose tip, tilted her head.

"I saw her."

Ryoko turned instantly.

"That blasted crabhead. She went into the depths of the forest. Heyyy, sneaky mean woman! Liar!! Bonsai-garden scientist! Flat-chested child scientist! Crab brain!"

"Wait!"

Kiyone pushed Ryoko aside.

Something had possessed her expression.

"I can hear it... a mysterious voice..."

Kiyone raised the Sword of Selene high and declared loudly:

"I am the true hero, Kiyone. Oh Hermit's Forest—open the true path before me and my companions!"

The path seemed to shimmer and waver—and then the forest simply opened.

A wide road stretched ahead, and at its end a small two-story house stood.

As the group approached, they could see a carved wooden plaque on the door.

"Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."

It read.

"What nerve!!"

Ryoko threw a lightning-kick and blasted the door open.

"Come out, Washu!! I'm going to strangle you and use you for tuna bait!!"

"Who's there?"

A girl with large eyes—wearing the same kind of black robe as Pete, water-blue hair in two bunches, and holding a broom—poked her head from the stair landing.

"Master is in the middle of research. She is not seeing anyone."

"Sasami-chan!?"

MihoKiyo were astonished.

"What? My name is Sammy."

"Sammy???"

"Yep. Pretty Sammy the magic girl♡"

The girl identical to Sasami smiled and struck a pose.

"Just kidding—I'm still an apprentice. Did you get through the loop-trap in the forest? Then maybe Master will see you. Let me go ask!"

The girl turned on her heel and started up the stairs she'd come down.

"Wait! You..."

MihoKiyo pushed Ayeka forward.

The girl turned.

She opened her big eyes in surprise and came down one step at a time.

"Big Sis?"

A look of surprise crossed the girl's eyes.

"Ayeka Big Sis!?"

Ayeka made a very strange face.

How strange? Like a face you'd make if you believed you were eating a strawberry cake and bit into a sushi roll with tuna and cream.

"Sa... sami?"

"Yeah!"

"Is it really Sasami!?"

"Yeah!!"

The Juraian sisters embraced firmly.

"Fuuu..."

Kiyone let out a sigh of relief.

Two people's memories had returned at once.

The Juraian royal bloodline was indeed strong.

"Oh?"

Ayeka looked around in puzzlement.

"Where is this? What was I doing here?"

"Freya!?"

Ayeka looked at the prince with puzzlement.

"Um... who are you again?"

The prince put his hand to his forehead and swayed.

And then—

"Noisy! What is all this commotion in someone's home!?"

A clear voice rang out.

A small figure in a black mantle slowly descended the stairs.

"Did you not read the plaque? Curses shall fall upon those who disturb the hermit's house!"

"There she is!"

Ryoko's figure vanished. Before you knew it, she was standing in front of the woman.

"Tei!"

She suddenly ripped off the black mantle.

"Ohh!?"

A cry of astonishment rose from the watching group.

Because what appeared was a girl with vivid red hair standing on end, swirly glasses, and a gown with shoulder pads covered in swirly patterns—an obviously suspicious girl of an estimated age of twelve or thirteen.

"You have seen through my illusion!!"

The girl cried in high spirits.

"I am Mingler Chaos, the great god of chaos! The left swirl rules the universe, the right swirl rules the world. I will grant one wish each. What would you have? A man? Gold? Or an irresistible body? In the hands of this Chaos, the world is as I will it. Whatever setting you desire is yours!"

Klonk! Ryoko's fist landed directly on the girl's head.

"You're the most dangerous one here!!"
At that instant, the swirly glasses fell off.
"What are you doing! Hitting your own mother!!"
In her usual tone, Washu looked up at Ryoko with narrowed eyes.
And then...
"Wait... what was Washu-chan doing, I wonder!?"
Looking down at herself with an expression more embarrassed than puzzled.
"DAAAAAH!!"
Everyone except the prince and Pete tumbled in a heap on the spot.

# Level 11:

# So You're the Hero

"So you're the hero, then."

Genius scientist Washu—who in one second had restored her memory and in two had grasped the situation—now resumed her lecture in front of the haggard Kiyone.

This was the second-floor lab.

By now, the swirly gown had been removed, and instead she wore a triangular hat and a wizard's robe.

"The ponytail with the ribbon pressing the protection release—that must have been you. Because the real world invaded the land of Heartsease, things are a mess everywhere you look—characters' personalities are warped, events happen spontaneously. It's a wonder the world didn't collapse entirely."

Washu tapped a keyboard that looked like a chessboard, and a vision appeared on the white tapestry.

The final stage—the underground labyrinth leading to the Demon King's Castle.

"But what's done is done. Kiyone, you're going here."

"Rather than play this game of pretend, can you do something about this?"

Ryoko grabbed Tenchi by the scruff of the neck and thrust him in front of Washu.

"Look at this face! Is this Tenchi? What have you done to my precious man!?"

"Any carrots?"

Tenchi pleaded in a miserable voice.

Even Ayeka, who would normally immediately snap back, hung her head, looking ashamed.

After all, she had the guilt of not having even recognized Tenchi.

"Carrots... Tenchi certainly got the worst deal of all this time."

Washu tapped the keyboard.

"Look, here. The data is still here. No lines, no events—just a passerby. Since Kiyone was registered as the hero, Tenchi was bumped out and happened to land in this passerby role. Really, Lord Tenchi is quite self-effacing. If he'd been reborn as the Demon King it would have been catastrophe. And as for you lot—"

Washu took her hands off the keyboard and glared at the familiar Masaki household faces.

"The hero yells at the king, the moon priestess picks fights in the middle of town, the thief goes and pays properly for things, and Ryoko—well, I suppose you're your usual self."

"Washu-chan was a ‘suspicious looking person' herself."

Mihoshi protested strenuously.

"Oh, I was cursed, you see. Don't dig too deep into that."

Washu said vaguely, then snapped her fingers at Tenchi.

His vacant eyes regained their light, and his expression sharpened.

"Hm... Washu-san!?"

Tenchi rubbed his neck and looked around, then backed away in surprise.

"E-everyone's here? What have I been doing all this time??"

"Oh, various things. More importantly..."

"Tenchi!!"

Ryoko suddenly cut her off.

"Good thing, Tenchi. I was so worried, afraid your memories weren't going to come back. Now everything's back to normal. Come on, let's go home."

"Myan!"

There was a sudden voice from his feet. Tenchi startled and jumped.

"Ryo... Ryo-ohki!?"

It was Ryo-ohki— but dozens of times her familiar size.

Tenchi nervously reached out and stroked Ryo-ohki's fluffy head.

"Myaaaan..."

Ryo-ohki closed her eyes and rubbed her head contentedly against Tenchi's hand.

"Nyaaaa, Tenchi!"

Ryoko wore an expression almost otherworldly in its sweetness and rubbed against Tenchi herself.

"These guys are going to fight the Demon King and save the world, they say. What do you want to do? Want to go with me to the hot springs?"

"Ryoko... I don't understand what's going on..."

Tenchi glanced nervously at Ayeka.

Strange.

She should have flown over here by now, as usual.

"Ryoko!!"

Instead, a furious unknown man came charging over.

"You've broken your promise! You and I are supposed to save the world together and open a new future! There's no time to be worrying about some carrot seller!?"

"When did I ever make that promise!?"

Ryoko shot back with a hostile expression.

"Don't go making up promises! You should be far away in space by now! You keep coming back from the dead like a zombie, and you think you can ask me to marry you!? You're a hundred years too early!!"

"Marry!?"

Zaphiel frowned.

"...I slipped..."

Ryoko went unusually red.

"Right... right! We were connected by the red thread of fate! All right! As soon as we save the world, it's the wedding!!"

"Get out!! Fall into a black hole and never come back!!"

Ryoko went red to the tips of her ears and swung her fists wildly to keep the prince at bay.

"Wedding...!? Carrot seller...!?"

Tenchi muttered, as if his reason had just collapsed.

"Lord Tenchi!"

Unable to bear it any longer, Ayeka rushed over.

"Let us return to our original world with me! It is dangerous to stay near such barbarians!"

"Ohhh, Big Sis is being unfair!"

Sasami, alias magic girl apprentice Sammy, came flying over.

"W-what do we do, Kiyo-chan..."

"What do we do, Miho-chan..."

"Mihoshi-san! Don't go home without me!!"

Pete grabbed Mihoshi's arm tearfully.

"All right, all right, all right! Everyone, I understand, now let go!!"

Washu clapped her hands sharply, astonishing everyone.

"You people—go have a bath and cool your heads. One by one. Otherwise it'll be another fight. While you're at it, Washu-chan will think up future measures. Go on, out!"

Washu waved her hand, and the ragged adventurers vanished in a flash—leaving only Washu and Sasami in the lab.

"Where did Big Sis and the others go?"

"A healing spring. It's like an outdoor bath. I've set it up separately for men and women, so I think it should be fine... but..."

Washu tapped the keyboard, and a scene full of rustic charm appeared on the tapestry.

A stream carving through deep mountains, and an outdoor bath smoking beside boulder-screens.

When Washu zoomed in on one side, the image showed Ryoko and Ayeka in the nude, grabbing each other and flinging water everywhere.

Nearby Mihoshi was humming carefree, while Kiyone was diligently washing her dirty clothes.

"...Business as usual."

Washu switched the vision to the other outdoor bath.

Tenchi, the prince, and Pete were keeping as much distance from each other as possible while washing, with a huge Ryo-ohki happily swimming right through the middle.

"I suppose it's better that they're not peeping."

Washu pressed a key and erased the vision, then stood up.

"Now. What to do..."

When the somewhat tidied Tenchi and the rest came back (or more accurately, were sent back), it was already past halfway through the afternoon.

"Ooh, looks yummy!"

Soup, sandwiches, and fruit—a simple menu, but a feast to starving adventurers.

"Itadakimaaas!"

Mihoshi began eating without a care in the world.

"I want you to listen while you eat."

Washu spoke.

"Unfortunately you can't return right away. The program is set so that you can't go home until the Demon King is defeated. All kinds of extraneous elements have gotten in, so I can't do an accurate simulation of what happens from here on. But Kiyone, you've become the hero anyway, so you'll see this through to the end. And Mihoshi—if I

leave you here you'll just do something else extra, so go along. Ayeka and Ryoko—I think you'd better stay here. Mr. Prince and Mr. wizard over there—you're going too, aren't you?"

"I won't go without Ryoko."

Zaphiel stubbornly shook his head.

"I'll go with Mihoshi-san."

Pete's mood was easy to read.

"Is something mixed up in you two?"

Washu sighed.

"The original party was four people. Hero, warrior, wizard, monk. That's the lineup that was supposed to defeat the Demon King. If you have a complaint, tell it to the person who pressed the extra switch. In the first place, things were already strange from the start. At Moon Valley the party should still have been three but was already four, and at Flame Mountain you were supposed to fight the bandits but were helped instead."

"I don't quite follow what you're saying..."

The prince furrowed his brow.

"Are you saying we're wrong? That there's another true hero?"

"Yes—over there."

Washu jutted her chin at Tenchi.

"Originally it was Lord Tenchi who was supposed to save the world!"

Tenchi shook his hands in a panic.

"Um, I don't mind, actually. I don't have any power, and I don't have the courage to take on such a big responsibility..."

"...What a failure."

Washu pressed her vertical creases and twisted her brow in frustration.

"The universe's greatest genius has failed for the first time! And I can't redo it because the reset button is far away in the real world. All right, forget it. You all go together. I don't know what will happen, but if you just sit here, the world really might be destroyed and everyone might become digital dust. In any case—defeat the Demon King, and the gate back to the real world opens. Now depart! And together defeat the Demon King!!"

Washu, with a dramatic background behind her, was fired up alone—and then she snapped back to herself under the stares of the seven and one.

"Hey, what about Sasami?"

Sasami, standing apart from the seven and one, tugged on Washu's sleeve.

"You're fine here. If Sasami-chan joins in, it'll turn into a different story."

Washu shuddered remembering Sasami's battle cry and held her temples.

"By the way, what exactly was magic girl Pretty Sammy?"

"Uhh... well..."

Apparently even she didn't quite know.

"...Anyway."

Washu stepped haggardly toward the stairs.

"Depart tomorrow morning. The gate to the Demon King's Castle is in the back garden."

That night, a storm raged outside the magic barrier of the Hermit's Forest, and in the Golden Castle, King Shamsiel was under his blanket trembling with his head covered.

# Level 12:

# General Zeidel!

"General Zeidel!"

Liargus raised his voice at the armored man who appeared in the labyrinth's small room.

"Where have you been? We can't manage without you here!"

"I was on patrol."

The man addressed as General removed his helm and ran his fingers through his abundant silver hair.

Cold reptilian gold eyes, handsome features with a thin smile—there was something ominous and sinister about his presence.

The demon realm's general, Zeidel, flicked his mantle and turned his back as if ending the conversation.

"What does it matter where I am?"

"What are you saying!?"

Liargus pointed a threatening finger.

"It's already the fifth day! We need to persuade the young prince to act more like a Demon King! I try to persuade him but the young prince has shut himself in his room and won't come out. I have to inspect the labyrinth traps, listen to the demons' complaints, and on top of that I alone am spinning around—I simply cannot handle what's outside anymore. The general goes missing and what are you doing all this time?"

"I know what I need to do."

The general gave a thin smile and turned.

"Just be ready to welcome the heroes. I'll bring the cream of the demon forces and intercept them. Any objections?"

Liargus couldn't help taking a step back at the man's cold gaze—then gathered his gown around him in irritation.

"Without the young prince coming out..."

"That feeble young fool!"

The general muttered, as if spitting.

"To think him Demon King Nergal's own child! Queen Ereshkigal sleeping in their bed surely weeps. With a son that weak—!"

"You speak out of turn."

Liargus lowered his voice and glared reproachfully.

"The young prince simply does not know battle. In the first place, the fact that Lord Nergal has not awakened with the hero appearing is itself odd. The demon alarm bell placed at his pillow should ring when the hero appears."

"Perhaps he turned it off and went back to sleep."

The general laughed.

"We're not talking about an alarm clock!"

"My apologies."

The man stopped laughing, and fixed Liargus with a piercing stare.

"A female hero is no threat. The young prince can sit on his throne and watch. This Zeidel will wield the Inferno Scythe and show the heroes the way out! By that he meant death."

Liargus recoiled instinctively, then gathered his gown in annoyance.

"Please do not forget those words. The young prince is the demon prince—the one who should become the conqueror of this Heartsease... the sole child who has inherited Lord Nergal's power!!"

Abruptly, Liargus's figure disappeared.

Zeidel smiled coldly, held out his hand into the air.

With a humming vibration, a blue-white scythe appeared.

"The young prince, you say!? It is I who shall rule the demon realm. I shall be the conqueror of Heartsease!"

Zeidel let out a roaring laugh cold and ominous as miasma rising from the depths of the demon realm.

"Young prince."

Liargus appeared before the prince's room and knocked softly.

"Please do come out! I have something to discuss."

"Do not disturb me!"

A shout came back from inside.

"I am thinking. With you coming every hour, nothing gets sorted!"

"I will help."

Liargus pressed on.

"You have been shut in for a full day now. What are you looking at, clasping the crystal ball? The heroes have already left the Hermit's Forest! Eight strong now, with a strange beast in tow! By noon today they'll have passed through the Valley of Regret and reached the Chasm of Despair! And it's still only the fifth day—they've come this far already! All this because Your Highness has not lifted a finger. General Zeidel is unreliable, the demoralized demons are constantly abandoning their posts and fleeing—I run around alone and nothing goes anywhere. Are you listening, young prince? I—"

The double doors flew open. Liargus nearly cracked his skull.

"I am waiting."

The demon prince looked down at Liargus with a haggard face and darkly burning eyes.

"For the moment I hold my bride in my own hands. A day or two early makes no difference. It just means the world becomes mine that much sooner. Call Zeidel. Call all the demons! Not one scratch shall be put on the hero—be thorough about it! This I command! None shall block her steps before she reaches me!"

"Oh...!"

The hollow eye sockets of Liargus lit with blue demonic flame.

"Young prince! You have awakened at last! That impudent female hero—to have Prince Azrael's embrace is a blessing beyond compare!"

Liargus clacked his teeth and tapped a dance-step rhythm with the hem of his gown.

"To be enveloped in the young prince's death-embrace and fall into eternal slumber—what could be more appropriate for the pitiful female hero! Oh, I beg your pardon..."

"...I'll take you apart bone by bone and hang you as a mobile."

"Come now, no need for that."

Liargus patted the prince's shoulder cheerfully.

"Let me see to it that the heroes reach your presence as swiftly as possible. I will go and relay your orders. Now then."

Liargus danced away down the corridor.

"Are we at the Demon King's Castle yet?"

Ayeka stopped, out of breath.

Kiyone led the way, Mihoshi and Pete and Tenchi followed, Ryo-ohki and Ryoko on both flanks, Zaphiel right behind—and a short distance back, Ayeka—the large party.

"Uh... we're walking through the Valley of Regret now, so we should reach the Chasm

of Despair soon."

Mihoshi looked up from the map.

The "river bed" was a difficult stretch of dried-up riverbed covered in large stones.

For about an hour, the party had been picking their way up this stream bed, developing blisters.

"The Valley of Regret—well-named."

Pete sat on a round stone and examined his scraped foot.

"Who decided that wizards wear sandals? At least short boots ought to be permitted."

"I feel the same."

Ayeka sympathized.

"I will heal you before we enter the Demon King's Castle. Not to worry. Still, what a depressing landscape."

Ayeka looked around.

The stream bed had no grass, and a heavy gray sky hung oppressively low.

Here and there on the completely dry, cracked bed, white bones of some creature or other lay scattered.

"By the way, Freya… or rather, Ayeka-san. Can you still use the priestess spells? I was worried you might have forgotten them when your original memory came back."

"I had Washu-san help me, and I can use them."

Ayeka smiled with unusual candor.

"I was Freya for so long that the Freya memories remained. The moment I recalled my devout feelings toward the Mother Goddess Selene, the magical power returned as well."

"That's a relief."

Pete smiled back genuinely.

"Without a healer, no matter how strong a party—we can't last to the end. That was my biggest concern. A wizard specializes in attack spells."

"I can actually use magic, you know."

Ayeka raised her eyes as if gazing into the far distance.

"I am a princess of a planet called Jurai, far far away. As a member of the royal family, I was granted a binding barrier for enemies and a shockwave. But here I probably can't use them. I'm not nimble enough to be Freya one moment and Ayeka the next."

"Which are you right now?"

"I became Freya when we passed through the gate."

When Ayeka smiled, Kiyone stood up.

"All right, one last push! Let's go!"

Before long the Chasm of Despair appeared.
A gorge carved into dark-black mountains of death, with a great cave opening its hollow jaw at the deepest point.
"That's..."
"It looks like the labyrinth entrance."
Mihoshi looked up from the map.
No one spoke.
The interior of the cave was choked with dark blackness, as if leading to the underworld.
"Below this is the Demon King's Castle..."
Kiyone's expression tightened.
A sudden inexplicable chill ran through her.
A stillness dominated the surroundings, as if the heightened feeling was draining away.

This is not just a game...

Kiyone murmured in her heart.
The Black Dragon's flames had scorched her body, the blue-white scythe had grazed the silver armor with a jarring sound—inside here might be real pain, and even death.
"Come on! A female hero needs beauty and fight!!"
Kiyone drew the Sword of Selene and prayed to the god of the Galaxy Police for a safe adventure.
"Kiyone-chan—number one in Japan! Oh??"
Mihoshi, holding a ball of the rising sun fan in both hands, looked down at the fallen Kiyone.
"Where did you get that from?"
"Washu-san said to take it..."
"...Now I truly understand that woman's character."
Kiyone pulled herself together, squared her shoulders, and marched into the cave. The adventurers filed in behind her.

# Level 13:

# Inside the Labyrinth

Inside the labyrinth, things were fairly tidy.

Like streetlights on a night road, pale lights were dotted at intervals.

That the lights were eerie blue-white orbs that turned their heads following the party's movements was—well, was what it was.

A stone-paved corridor with doors lined densely on both sides—not that wide; at most enough for three to walk abreast.

Kiyone and Mihoshi were at the front, and the rest were a jumble behind.

"You know, I thought a dungeon would be creepier."

"Me too."

"Suddenly encounter a monster around a corner! That kind of thing."

"What do you mean, 'encounter'?"

"Run into each other by surprise."

"Mihoshi, you know a fair bit. You were playing games the whole time I was at work, weren't you?"

"N-not exactly..."

Provoking the other on purpose, Mihoshi smiled to cover it up, and Kiyone with a serious face drew her unsheathed sword and started walking.

"So this is a dungeon... do we have to open the small rooms?"

Tenchi, sandwiched between Ryo-ohki and Ryoko, looked around curiously at the stone walls and thick wooden doors.

Unlike MihoKiyo and Ryoko who had proper equipment, Tenchi was in his samue coat and sneakers.

His weapon was a single wooden sword.

Minimal equipment.

"Hey, carrot seller."

Zaphiel walking ahead turned.

"What's your specialty? Farming?"

"Please don't call me 'carrot seller.'"
Tenchi sighed, having heard the story after the fact.
"I genuinely didn't know."
"Don't bully MY Tenchi!"
Ryoko shot back immediately.
"Nothing wrong with it, carrot selling. Tenchi is actually incredibly strong. You don't know, so you're saying that, but he can use the (Kyooh Shinken) True Light Hawk Sword, you know. Right, Tenchi?"
"What's Kyooh Shinken? Chinese food?" More provoking the other on purpose.
"Nothing happening."
"Indeed."
"Are your feet all right?"
"Oh, I forgot. I'm sorry—I'll chant a healing spell now."
Freya-mode Ayeka and Pete were relaxed.
The overall atmosphere was convivial.
And then the corridor came to a dead end, and a door appeared.
"Here we go!"
"It's just a door, Kiyo-chan." Mihoshi knocked on it.
"Anyone hooome?"
No answer of course.
"You idiot. When this happens, you slowly..."

BANG!!

Ryoko kicked the door open.
"Come on monsters!! The magnificent Ryoko-sama is going to crush you all!!"
She immediately slipped.
"Owww!?"
Something slimy was writhing across the entire floor.
On closer inspection, the slime was writhing on the walls and ceiling too.
"What IS this!? Sticky flypaper?"
"Bubbly Slimes! Get out of the way. O spirit of flame, Ifreet..."
"H-hey, wait—!"
A rush of flame swirled, and Ryoko flattened herself with her head in her hands.

One minute later, Ryoko stood in the middle of a now-clean room.

A little scorched, but uninjured.

"S-sorry, Ryoko-san. I'm rear guard so I couldn't see you..."

"I thought I was going to die!!"

Ryoko punched Pete flying and, still not appeased, surveyed her surroundings.

"Three doors... try all of them?"

"Wait! There's an arrow over there."

When Kiyone went closer, she found a rough-drawn arrow on the sooty door straight ahead.

Written in writing that looked as if someone had been in a hurry—and thoughtfully—the word "Route" was written.

"...What a helpful dungeon." said Zaphiel. "It's not a trap, is it?"

"Kiyo-chan, in real dungeons you're supposed to open every small room and map every step."

"Says who!?"

"Because we always use strategy guides. Want to map it, Kiyo-chan?"

"...Let's just follow the arrows."

From then on, the party opened doors, turned corners, descended stairs and opened doors, defeated minor monsters, passed through teleport points, spun around on rotating floors, slid down chutes, fell into pits and climbed out, opened more doors and were now walking down a corridor.

"Waaah... I have absolutely no idea where we are."

The second-in-line Mihoshi leaned tearfully on Kiyone's back.

Now Kiyone and Zaphiel were at the front, since the frontrunner tended to get the worst of things.

"Sorry. I... haven't been any use."

Third in line, Tenchi spoke to Kiyone ahead of him.

"It's fine, Tenchi-san. It's something that I, the hero, should face."

Kiyone looked down at the silver armor—which through sliding and getting covered in soot, seemed somehow thinner—and felt it with her eyes.

Her body beneath the armor was fine.

No formidable monsters had appeared so far, but Kiyone felt painfully aware that this armor was protecting her as a hero.

Originally, Tenchi was supposed to be walking at the front as hero.

Kiyone recalled Washu's talk.

This world was made for Tenchi alone —where his companions would be filled with

warm friendship and burning romance, welling courage and bone-chilling battle.
A world originally made just for Tenchi.
Thinking that, Kiyone somehow felt as if she had stolen Tenchi's fun—no, Tenchi's life.
"Hey..."
In the middle of the long corridor, Kiyone turned.
"Should I swap with you as hero, Tenchi-san?"
"Hm?"
Tenchi looked puzzled.
"What's wrong? Are you not feeling well?"
"Not that—I just feel kind of sorry... Tenchi-san was the real main character, wasn't he? Because of a certain airhead, it ended up like this by chance, but I think even now it could be swapped. Do you think this armor could fit Tenchi-san?"
"Impossible, the body shape is different."
Tenchi smiled encouragingly at the dejected Kiyone.
"It's fine as it is. Kiyone-san, you look great in it. The armor fits perfectly, and you're better with the sword than I am. And besides, you're already the hero. You met companions and struggled step by step all the way here. I haven't done anything."
Tenchi smiled freely.
"I'm not really hero material anyway. As Zaphiel-san says, carrot seller probably suits me best."
"Tenchi-san..."
Kiyone, who'd been feeling nervous, found tears in her eyes without thinking.
"You're such a good person. I can see why Ryoko-san and Ayeka-san fell for you at first sight."
"Right? Kiyone, you've finally figured out what's good about Tenchi. Even if he's a carrot seller, Tenchi is Tenchi. No matter how pitiful he looks in normal life, Tenchi is Tenchi. People aren't judged by looks or strength, right? It's love, love! No matter how useless Tenchi is, my love doesn't waver!"
"Ryoko..."
Tenchi gave a faint voice from behind Ryoko, who was on a roll with dark waves behind her.
"That sounds the same as saying you're unnecessary..."
"Well, never mind the details."
Ryoko, apparently satisfied, smiled cheerfully and slapped Tenchi on the back.
"This dungeon is boring with no monsters. The main thing is to defeat the Demon King, right? Don't worry, Kiyone. Even if you fail, I'll take him down."

In the demon prince's chamber and that of Liargus, they were watching the heroes through monitor devices set up on the improvised route.

The monitor devices were Will-o'-the-Wisps.

The blue-white orbs the Kiyone party had taken for lights were actually monitor devices.

"They're progressing nicely."

Watching the scenes reflected on the great hall tapestry, Liargus grumbled slightly.

"A little more suspense would be desirable, but since it is young prince's orders, it cannot be helped. But is it really fine for there to be so many of them besides the hero? It would get more exciting with fewer. Normally this labyrinth should take days to conquer—it's the labyrinth of death. We've set up a route, driven out all the monsters—everyone is very unhappy. Since there is nothing around them, we put some minor ones like slimes and bats, but the authority of this Dark Fort, the source of terror..."

"I don't care."

The prince cut him off with annoyance.

"Pointless killing is not to my taste. Besides, I find damp places disagreeable. I had been thinking of selling this labyrinth and building a comfortable house on the lakeshore of Grace. Father is asleep anyway, so what does it matter? Times change. Even demons stagnate if stuck in old ways. It's the progress of the times, wouldn't you say—for a hero to be a woman, when heroes were always assumed to be male? Fighting and devouring one another is not all there is. I want to rule the world with a more refined approach."

"I can't keep up with young prince's thinking. Sell this labyrinth? If the great Demon King Nergal heard of this, how furious he would be! The Young prince is supposed to be the symbol of terror. The name of Prince Azrael should be whispered with fear and dread—becoming a mere dissolute noble is the end! Seeking comfort is the first step to decadence."

"Lecturing me, are you."

The prince's eyes took on a cold light.

"I can sell YOU too. I imagine the magic academy's research labs would pay well. Liargus, you have served me well. I'll see to it that you have a peaceful retirement."

"...Surely you jest."

Liargus hunched his shoulders.

"I only meant to express concern for young prince..."

"Shh."

Azrael sharpened his voice.
"—Something's wrong!"

In the next small room, Kiyone was attacked without warning—no time to raise the Sword of Selene.
Three enemies—a great axe-wielding berserker at the front, two sorcerers flanking.
The sorcerers' eyes were unnaturally vacant.
As if someone were controlling them.
"Kiyone-chan, you're bleeding..."
Mihoshi went deathly pale and ran over.
Right now in this small room were just Kiyone and Mihoshi.
They had casually opened a door, stepped in—and the door closed.
"Move!"
Kiyone threw Mihoshi aside just as the axe swung down with a roar.
She twisted her body with inches to spare.
At that instant, a sharp pain shot through her left leg.
Searing agony.
But if she hadn't dodged the first sneak attack, she'd have been cleaved in two.
The berserker, having been dodged twice, growled like an animal and began circling to look for an opening.
"Mihoshi... open the door!"
Without taking her eyes off the berserker, Kiyone whispered sharply.
Blood was spurting from the deep gash.
The hand gripping the Sword of Selene trembled, movement sluggish.
And then the berserker's huge body turned.
Far faster than expected.
Kiyone involuntarily shielded herself with the sword.
With a dull metallic clang the sword slid, and this time a heavy impact came to the right shoulder.
Unable to absorb the shock, her left knee buckled—she forced it upright with sheer will, and used the spring of her right foot alone to kick off the floor.
She had to put at least some distance between them.
"It won't open!"
Mihoshi turned back with a tearful face.
"There's magic sealing it... watch out!"

The short sword she threw on impulse pierced the berserker's wrist.
The berserker let out a rage-roar and this time turned on Mihoshi.
"Mihoshi!!"
Kiyone dashed at the berserker in desperation and slashed at its back.
Some resistance. Not a deep wound.
The berserker wheeled around and drove its clenched fist into Kiyone, knocking her flying.
She crashed to the floor and her vision went momentarily dark.
The berserker roared in triumph and this time slowly took aim at Mihoshi, raising the axe.
Then a grating chanting was heard.
The sorcerers were chanting in unison.
The air in the small room wavered, temperature plunging rapidly.
Kiyone realized the spell was aimed at her.
She had to run, she thought, but her body wouldn't move.
"Oh God!"
An infinite volley of ice arrows was fired at Kiyone at the same moment something black blocked her view.
The ice arrows shattered with a keen sound midway through.
Countless shards sparkled and fell silently as the man in a black mantle casually extended one hand and murmured something.
Two sorcerers crumbled to ash.
The berserker's scream cut off midway, and the massive body crumbled away like sand.
The axe fell to the floor with a heavy sound.
"You are..."
Trembling lips failed to form words.
"Don't speak. I'll open the door now."
The man murmured something at the door, and it opened as if nothing had happened.
"Kiyone-san!!"
With Zaphiel and Tenchi at the front, the party that had been shut outside came rushing in.
"What on earth..."
"Tenchi-san! We just..."
When Kiyone turned, the man's figure was nowhere to be seen.

"Young prince!! It was not I!"
Liargus let out a startled cry as Azrael returned.
"Then who violated the orders!? I strictly commanded not to touch the hero!!"
The prince's dark eyes looked as if they might spit flames.
Blatant insubordination had enraged him.
"The barrier may have broken in part and they wandered in. Those berserkers are creatures that understand no words. I'll send Night Stalkers immediately to investigate."
"Do not! You go. Wait—!!"
The prince snapped his fingers and pulled an owl mask out of midair, covering everything from eyes to nose.
"I'll go myself. I'll find out whether it was a simple accident or something else! You keep up careful monitoring from here."
The black mantle of the prince fluttered and his figure vanished. Liargus was left with the empty throne.

"Oh Mother Selene!"
Freya, a.k.a Ayeka, knelt beside Kiyone and held her hands out.
"Hear the prayer of your faithful servant, Freya..."
The prone, limp Kiyone's body was enveloped in a soft light.
Two wounds—a tear in the left leg and a broken collarbone—had dazzling light converge on them, then it diffused and faded.
"Ayeka-san?"
Kiyone opened her eyes.
She sat up in puzzlement and rotated her right shoulder.
"This is incredible... is this the power of magic?"
Only a pool of blood where Kiyone had been lying testified to the fierce battle.
"It is Lady Selene's mercy."
Ayeka stood.
Her face, gentle and pure, was that of Priestess Freya.
"Are there any others who have been injured?"
The relieved party began talking all at once about what had just happened.

"Moon Priestess Freya..."

Azrael in his owl mask let out a breath of relief.

The adventurers below were now arguing over who should go first.

He had transferred to directly above the small room where Kiyone and the others were, and used a see-through spell to watch them below.

"All seems fine now."

Azrael waved a hand lightly and the floor that had been transparent like a circle returned to normal.

At the same time, from a small room off the marked route, there came a sound of irritable tongue-clicking.

In the corner of the lightless small room, a mirror glowed dimly in an oval of light.

"...Lucky ones."

The armored man before the mirror raised a hand and erased the illusion of the heroes.

Slowly, a different face surfaced on the mirror.

A man with long silver hair bound at the back and cold golden eyes.

"But heroes. What comes next is the critical moment. Stay alive as long as you can—and entertain me."

The man murmured something, and his figure vanished.

Simultaneously the mirror that had reflected the man's image disappeared, leaving only true darkness.

# Level 14:

# Quiet Down!

"Quiet down! One person up front is plenty!!"

Kiyone and the others were silenced. Zaphiel descended the stairs at the corridor's end, faced forward and walked on ahead gracefully.

The party, reluctantly, followed.

Kiyone and the others had descended to the lowest floor without realizing it.

Unlike previous corridors, a wide passage extended deep ahead—enough for six to walk abreast.

The flagstones had changed to polished black marble, and the walls on both sides were decorated with serpentinite—green-patterned like paisley or moiré.

Here and there small room doors were black ebony with gold-worked handles, and above each door was a grinning skull knocker.

The dwelling of the labyrinth's master—heavy and stately.

"Kiyo-chan, is this... the final boss?"

Mihoshi whispered.

"...So it seems."

Kiyone's brow had tiny beads of cold sweat.

Having once been near death, her senses were finely tuned to the different air here.

The air was heavy.

As if burdened under the weight of death, a groan of resentment seemed to fill the space.

"What a sinister place."

Ryoko muttered as if to herself, yet casually overtook Kiyone, drawing up beside Zaphiel.

"...This is the kind of place where you don't watch your step and you die. Seiran—watch yourself."

"Seiran?"

"My mistake. Zaphiel, you said."

Even from her back, Ryoko's tension was evident.
Ryoko was moving unconsciously slower, making Zaphiel slow his pace too.
As a space pirate who had survived many tight spots, Ryoko instinctively sensed danger.
"Ayeka... or rather, Freya-sama."
Pete, who had already stumbled several times, looked with concern at Ayeka.
"Your color isn't good. Should we put up a defensive barrier and rest?"
"No... the darkness here is too deep... I'm fine. I can walk. I am a Selene Priestess."
"I understand." Pete lowered his voice so as not to be overheard.
"This is the breath of things that nest in the dark. We are, so to speak, inside a dragon's belly."
After that, conversation ceased.
Tenchi was listening to whispered exchanges and feeling as if he were seeing a bad dream.
Why was he walking in such a place? He had no idea.
He didn't so much not understand as feel like the Tenchi walking here was someone else.
The hard, smooth marble floor, the weight of the wooden sword he'd never yet used—he could feel them, but there was no sense of reality.
"I'm in trouble..."
He murmured to himself, but the situation didn't change.
The game where Tenchi was supposed to be the hero—silver armor and the Sword of Selene that he should have been equipped with.
Adventures he should have had—landscapes.
He didn't feel the slightest anger or resentment.
Just a little sad.
That among these 'adventurers' bound by intimate connection, he was just so useless.
Well, that's fine.
He tried murmuring it in his heart.
We're all together anyway, and what we're doing is not that different...
And at that moment, Kiyone up ahead suddenly stopped.
Because Ryoko and Zaphiel at the front had stopped.
"What is it!?"
"Shh..."
Ryoko restrained Kiyone who had stepped forward.
"Look."

In the middle of the corridor, something like a doll was hunched over.
It looked like a small figure crudely made of rags.
Wearing paper armor, holding a paper cut-out sword.
And then the doll popped to its feet.
"Wel...come... Heroes... I've... been wait...ing for you."
The doll's mouth split open in a gash, and simultaneously its small body shot into the air with explosive force.
With a hushing intake of breath, a great quantity of blue flame gushed from its mouth.
"Die!!"
A shrill voice rang over the flames.
"Air Shield!"
Pete's clear voice rang back against the flames.
The heat vanished and the flames writhed and faded on the other side of the air barrier.
Simultaneously Zaphiel kicked off the floor.
"You monster!!"
The doll's figure vanished, and the greatsword slashed empty air.
"Here... here..."
The doll mockingly appeared at Zaphiel's feet, then the next moment appeared above Kiyone's head.
"Don't mind that doll! It's a decoy!!" Pete cried.
"Run! Something's coming..."
And then suddenly his figure was lifted by some invisible hand.

Groaaaaan...

With an eerie sound, a three-meter-tall demon realm golem materialized.
Two twisted horns, colorless white skin and eyes—like plaster poured solid.
The creature—less golem and more devil—swung its arm and threw its prize to the floor.
"Oh mother Selene!"
The fall stopped suddenly. Pete's body froze just above the floor.
The golem tilted its head as if baffled, then raised one great foot.

It was going to crush them all together.
"Run!"
The now-free Pete sprang up swiftly, and held up the staggering Ayeka.
"If you stand there you'll be squashed flat!"
Ryoko grabbed the two by the collar and space-transferred.
And then, another golem materialized ahead.
Sludge-like and oozing mud at its feet.
"A Mud puppet!!"
Ryoko jumped high and unleashed a three-kick combo.
Three holes opened with no resistance at all, and instantly closed back up.
While that happened, the golem from behind was approaching.
"Earth to earth, ash to ash—return!"
A black-clad figure blocked the path before the cornered Kiyone and the others.
A tall man in an owl mask.
And both golems crumbled with startling ease.
"The great hall is just ahead. Go!"
The man clasped his hands and began chanting a soft spell.
The mud that had been trying to well up again swirled and was absorbed into the floor.
Kiyone caught her breath.
That figure... in that small room earlier, the one who saved me...
"Kiyone-san, quickly!"
Without being able to say anything, Kiyone started running.

The giant black door blocked their path.
As Kiyone and the others stopped, the door slowly opened inward.
"Welcome, heroes."
The armored man seated on the throne rose.
Wearing a vivid red mantle, his silver hair loosened from its tie and wearing a crown.
"My name is Zeidel. Master of this Dark Fort—Demon King of the demon realm. Well done making it this far. I thought you'd collapse in front of the door..."
The man twisted his lips and smiled.
"What are you doing? Don't just stand there—come in. And the clown as well!"
"...So that's how it is."
Behind Kiyone came a subdued voice.

The owl-masked man appeared from behind the adventurers.

He pushed the adventurers aside, walked to the front, and removed the mask, dropping it to the floor.

"Well, young prince. I was worried about you. I wondered if perhaps my golems had crushed you..."

Zeidel's throat made a sound—kekke. Laughter that couldn't be contained distorted his handsome face.

"Unfortunately the seat for the young prince is no longer available. I'll prepare a throne befitting a tragic prince—beside Nergal and Ereshkigal lying in the mausoleum deep underground!"

Tossing his crowned silver hair, Zeidel threw his head back and roared with laughter.

"Young prince! I'm terribly sorry..."

A frail voice escaped from a heap of bones and black gown at Zeidel's feet.

"Liargus!?"

"Fool! You trusted a woman and didn't even notice the ground being cut from under you. You'll be eaten alive by maggots. Since demon realm beings can't be sliced to death—I'll do so while you're still alive!"

Kiyone stared blankly back and forth between the two men.

The silver-haired man who called himself Demon King and the dark-haired man called Prince.

One of them was certainly the man who had saved Kiyone and the others.

"This can't be..."

Words spilled from trembling lips.

This development was completely unexpected.

Yet—what had been expected?

A great dragon coiled on the throne? Or a great devil with goat horns and a scorpion tail?

"Wait!!"

Unexpectedly, a cry burst from her throat.

She stepped alone from the shadow of the door.

"I am the hero who came to save the world!! I didn't come to watch internal squabbling! Which one of you is the real Demon King!? If you won't answer, I'll have the Sword of Selene ask it for you! Answer me!"

"Kiyone!!"

Azrael turned.

"I did not wish to meet you this way. When I welcomed you, I had planned to scatter flowers, burn incense befitting a prince's bride."

"Are you..."

A vivid scene flashed back in Kiyone's mind.

The ripple on the lakeshore at Grace, sweet whispers exchanged in the dark, the feel of ice-cold hands and dark purple eyes...

"My name is Azrael. Child of my father Nergal and mother Ereshkigal."

Azrael gave a quiet smile.

A smile that made a man's soul run hot—looking at the woman he loved.

"Quite a moving reunion."

A mocking voice cut in.

"Let me make it simultaneously your final farewell. Oh my father, Jormungandr!"

Zeidel stretched out his hand.

"Great chain that binds Heartsease—lend me your power!"

Behind Zeidel, ominous sinister air rose shimmering.

Before their eyes the energy condensed and a great serpent appeared.

The thick serpent bowed its head, raced across the floor, and coiled around Azrael from his feet to his chest.

"Azrael!!"

"Don't come! You'll lose your life if you touch it!"

Giin!! With a sound, the great serpent transformed into iron chains of black iron.

Creaking around the prince's body, crushing him.

"Pitiful, prince."

Zeidel moved in slowly.

"It is because you let love steal your heart that you lose your power. Remarkable... demon realm beings possess no soul."

Zeidel's hand produced the Inferno Scythe.

"Then let me cleave through you—soul and all. Fall into the darkness!!"

Zan—the blue-white scythe sliced through the air.

GAAN!!

With a violent sound the blade was deflected.

"Coward!!"

Kiyone swept the blue-white scythe away with all her might.

Returning the blade, she brought it down on the iron chain wound around Azrael's

body.
The blade flared white-hot, and the chain shattered and scattered in pieces.
"I understand now! You're the Demon King who would destroy the world. You'll regret making a fool of the female hero. What's wrong with having love!?"
"Grrrrr..."
Zeidel's face contorted in fury.
Gold light burst from both his eyes.
"Faker...! I know the truth. You are no hero. You are nothing more than vermin who wandered into this Heartsease!"

GUGGOGOGO...

With a low rumble, Zeidel's form stretched upward.
The rumble grew and grew into a vibration shaking the great hall.
Zeidel's form transformed.
His enlarged arms became a blue-white scythe, his torso a serpent covered in scales, his face to something inhuman—a creature of a different realm...
"Die!!"
From that mouth slit to the ears in a mocking sneer, a flat mechanical voice ground out.
At the same time—with a force incomparable to anything before—the scythe came down.
"Kiyone!!"
Giin—the Sword of Selene groaned and shattered, losing its light.
The scythe caught Kiyone's right shoulder.
With a sound like a pissshhh, a spray of blood smoke blew up.
Kiyone made a strange expression.
"Ha..."
A breath escaped, vibrating her vocal cords.
The next instant, Kiyone's body split in two and crumpled.
"Kiyone-chan!!"
Mihoshi wrenched free of Pete's hand and rushed out.
"Fool!"
A suddenly thrust hand sent Mihoshi flying.

"My turn!!"

Zaphiel cried out and rushed at the giant devil.

What followed felt like watching slow motion.

The adventurers who had broken into a rush, one after another fell in sprays of blood... Zaphiel, Ryoko, Mihoshi, Pete... Freya a.k.a Ayeka...

"This can't... be..."

Before Tenchi realized it, the one left alone in a corner of the great hall was just himself.

"Wh... at are you... what is... who are you..."

The creature formerly called Zeidel slowly raised its great scythe.

"Run, young man."

From the midst of blue body fluid and lumps of flesh, Azrael's face peered out.

His body—literally cleaved into five pieces—was desperately trying to come together and regenerate.

"I cannot regenerate yet... quickly!"

"Ah..."

Tenchi's legs trembled.

Just a game... the hero program...?

"This can't be real!?"

At that moment.

A deep vibration shook the great hall.

Cracks appeared with crackling sounds, and the ceiling, walls, and floor began to crumble.

Strange electrical charge filled the air and plasma crackled.

"Get out!! Hurry, disappear!!"

Tenchi closed his eyes instinctively and threw out his hands.

# Level 15:

# What a Failure

"What a failure..."

A sad voice said.

"This world has stopped moving. Shall I erase it, as you said?"

Tenchi's eyes snapped open.

All around was silence, and countless pieces of rubble were frozen, about to fall.

"Who is it!?"

Before Tenchi's eyes, a small figure appeared.

A young girl with red hair standing on end.

"Not Washu-san..."

The girl's face was more childlike, her large black eyes downcast sadly.

"You... aren't the hero either."

The girl looked up.

"I am Chaos. Mingler Chaos. But right now I'm nobody."

"I am..."

"I know. Tenchi, right? Same thing."

The girl walked through the time-frozen great hall with a light, bouncing step.

"This person—wasn't a monster like this."

The girl floated up lightly and flicked Zeidel's giant scythe with a finger.

"All kinds of things flowed into my world... hatred, stories from unknown lands, humans from far across the stars, food made by machines... I couldn't control it anymore. I couldn't stop the world changing everywhere. And then it stopped."

"When you say stopped..."

The girl spoke a string of English-like technical jargon.

Whatever it was, Tenchi couldn't make it out or understand it.

"It doesn't matter anymore. I'll erase it all."

"Just like that—!"

Tenchi shouted back without thinking.

"Everyone in here is my dear friends. If you say erase—will they really disappear? Can

they never go back to the real world?"
"I don't know."
The girl said bluntly.
"It was these people who brought all sorts of things in. You... you can probably go back. You weren't captured by this world. Look, there's a gate over there? That's the passage. But why does someone unrelated to this world care?"
"Unrelated?"
"You didn't have an adventure, did you?"
Tenchi looked silently up at the gate in the corner of the great hall.
A rainbow-colored gate.
He had gone through it once before—from the back garden of the hermit's house...
"I did have an adventure."
Tenchi turned.
"I couldn't do anything, but we all had an adventure together. Erasing the world... are you a god?"
"No."
The girl shook her head.
"I've watched it from when it was born. Raising a small sprout, tending it. But the world won't be erased and I disappear too. It's broken beyond repair."
The girl's face crumpled sadly.
A face as if blaming herself—regretting.
"That's not so. You... could this be the world's program? Then if we redo it..."
Knowing a program of numbers couldn't have a personality, Tenchi still couldn't help saying something.
"Program? No. You're not very smart."
The girl sighed.
"If I enter this gate, the world disappears. So you go in first. Goodbye, Tenchi."
"Hold on!"
Tenchi hurriedly called back the girl who had started to turn away.
"Is there really nothing that can be done? I... want to do something. I want this world back the way it was. I don't know much about it, but isn't there some kind of save function in every program? I'll do anything I can. So please—tell me."
"I said it's not a program."
The girl turned angrily.
"Listen, Tenchi. I am the world itself. Heartsease—tangled and confused, messed up—that itself is me. I hate this world! The real Heartsease means 'peace of mind.'

There were seven towns, connected by rainbow-colored gates... a world like a precisely woven tapestry. ...But somewhere a gear slipped. I couldn't stop the world changing everywhere. And then it stopped. Someone brought chaos into my world. Someone brought contradiction. Even my name changed. Sunk in chaos, in this world I became Mingler Chaos..."

The girl's expression fell.

Tenchi swallowed his next question.

This girl is suffering.

Her world was changed without permission and she doesn't know what to do.

"Chaos..."

"Don't call me that!"

The girl shot back sharply.

"What can I do? How can I help?"

Tenchi patiently placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Bring the golden apple. That was originally the hero's task. The golden apple that brings joy to this world... But the seven towns may have already perished. The apple tree may have disappeared. Will you still go?"

"I'll go. I want to help everyone. I want to put this right."

"Where in the world?"

The girl smiled with effort.

"Somewhere in the world... near the one who loved this world most..."

"Let's go."

Tenchi and the girl took hands, and disappeared from the frozen great hall.

The whole world was frozen.

In the Golden Castle's throne room, where time had stopped mid-collapse, King Shamsiel was huddled with his eyes wide open in terror.

The castle soldiers had all fled, and in the town square, demons were just in the process of bursting from the deep underground.

Moon Valley was as it had been when attacked by the demon army.

Not a soul remained in the Silver Temple.

When Freya the priestess had left, the remaining nuns must have gone too—the cupboards and pantries had been hastily emptied, and trampled clothes were strewn across the floor.

In the innermost chapel, a single old nun was kneeling in prayer.

But there was no golden apple beside her.

In the fortress on Flame Mountain, bandits were panicking at the demon assault.

There had been an internal quarrel—bodies lay piled near treasure chests, and a bandit who had been running with jewels clutched to his chest had a crossbow bolt in him.

The Lake of Grace was completely dried up.

The lakeside town of Grace was smashed to pieces, and fire dragons swaggered about, scorching houses with frozen fire-breath.

The Hermit's Forest looked unchanged.

The path Kiyone had opened led to the hermit's house still standing, but no one was inside.

The magic barrier of this house had been hit by a major earthquake, and inside the room, magic books and tools were scattered everywhere.

"Washu-san!?"

Tenchi cried out involuntarily.

But the frozen air did not carry sound.

Only Sasami's little broom lay fallen beneath the open door.

And nowhere in the forest was any golden apple tree.

In the Valley of Regret and Chasm of Despair, every demon that had escaped the underground labyrinth had died.

Whether something had gone wrong with the air here, the demons had clawed at their chests, or some had curled up and lay scattered across the ground.

From the great to the small, the noble to the lowly, death had visited them all equally.

Whatever they were, it was a pitiful sight.

"Death..."

Descending the labyrinth, step by step down stairs, Tenchi murmured the word carved into every scene he had seen.

"Has passed through the world... the day of destruction has come..."

Tenchi and the girl returned to the great hall and stood silently watching the frozen scene.

"...It was nowhere, was it."

Tenchi moved slowly away from the girl's side and walked around the hall.

Kiyone had fallen as Mihoshi—trying to run to her—and Pete falling to protect Mihoshi.

Beside Zaphiel were Ryoko and Ryo-ohki. And Ayeka with a protective seal frozen in her hands.

From beneath Azrael's severed body, a cramped right hand peeked out.
The right hand was reaching for a thrown-out left hand, as if trying to form some kind of seal.
"Why..."
The breath he tried to draw felt like a lump stuck in his throat and trembled.
Over there even Ryoko—who seemed unable to die no matter how many times she was killed—so easily...
What... where had things gone wrong?
Or—was this how the role in this world had been destined?
Had they... trusted this world?
"Why did it turn out like this!?"

At that moment.
A thin light extended from Azrael's body.
Light also extended from around Kiyone's chest, and the two met partway and merged.
Similar light extended from Zaphiel's body, then Pete's, and a little later merged with Ryoko's and Mihoshi's lights.
The five lights intertwined, weaving a vortex of light in the middle.
Hesitantly, Ayeka's light joined.
The vortex of light slowly rotated, growing larger, then smaller, spreading wide, illuminating Kiyone and the others' faces.
At last from its center, a thin trunk rose.
The trunk drew up light like absorbing nutrients, and grew taller and firmer steadily.
The tip began to branch.
Branches spread, generating countless forks.
At last, one leaf was born.
And then the next, and the next.
Leaves were born sparkling, forming the shape of a tree—slender but supple.

The tree finally shivered its supple body and produced a small fruit.
A small golden apple—just the size to cup in one hand.
"Look!...That’s..."
Tenchi whispered without being able to take his eyes off it.

"...The golden apple!"
The girl whispered back.
"Why? It's not your world. You loved it so much?"
Tenchi slowly approached the tree.
Countless leaves rustled as if quivering with joy.
The golden fruit radiated light like a living joy, faintly swaying.
"This?"
Tenchi felt as if he shouldn't touch it and looked back.
The girl smiled.
"Take it! If you love this world..."
Tenchi turned back, reached out for the small fruit, and gently plucked it.
"Now—wish just one thing. Whatever it is you want most."
Listening to those words half in a dream, Tenchi gazed at the golden tree.
Hero and demon prince, wizard and thief, bandit and warrior—and moon priestess, and me who could do nothing.
Our roles were different, but we were born in this world, traveled together.
We fought together with our strength, and that strength gave out.
What should be wished for?
This me, and this girl who said she was the world itself...
Tenchi turned to the girl.
Her face broke into a smile.
"Smile, Chaos. So that this world becomes as you wished..."
When he finished wishing, intense light burst from the apple.
The light spread visibly, swallowing the hall of blood and darkness.
It raced up the stairs, filled every corner of the labyrinth, and burst out its maw.
Out of the Chasm of Despair, racing through the Valley of Regret, lighting the Hermit's Forest and running toward the Lake of Grace, Flame Mountain, Moon Valley—climbing and descending.
Water filled the lake.
The dragons returned to their lairs on Flame Mountain, and the demons were sent back to their burrows in demon realm darkness and the dark of their respective homes.
The marketplace filled with the laughter of people, the burned-out houses bathed in new light transformed into a beautiful townscape.
As the light passed the tip of the Golden Castle, the castle walls shone brilliantly, and the guards knelt before King Shamsiel and swore loyalty.

On the legendary tapestry, the seven and one heroes were born.
When the small light born from the apple reached the Field of Departure, the whole world was revived.

"Ugh..."
Kiyone slowly opened her eyes and sprang upright.
"Mihoshi!?"
"I'm here."
A cheerful voice came back.
"Ryoko-san, Ayeka-san. Everyone's safe."
Kiyone blinked.
I died once... I'm sure of it...
"Kiyone."
A familiar voice called her name, and Kiyone turned.
"Azrael? That monster..."
"It has gone. It was not of this world."
Azrael took Kiyone's hand and drew her close.
"Thank goodness... yours was the last to wake."
"Wake? I... was asleep?"
"Yes."
Azrael lovingly pressed her face to his chest.
"The world is revived. Your feelings saved the world."
Before the throne, Ryoko and Zaphiel had already started arguing.
"So come to my castle! I died and revived twice—there's no man like that in all Heartsease. Just shut up and come with me!"
"Are you stupid? I'm going home with Tenchi. I'll make you die again. You have a fiancée, don't you? Keep going and instead of a wedding I'll hold a funeral!"
Mihoshi was sitting on the floor, eagerly watching Pete's finger trace a magic circle.
"Listen, Mihoshi-san. This is the magic circle against accidents, this is the one to call luck. When you go back to the other world, please remember them. I'm the finest wizard in Heartsease now, you know. With these two you'll be fine for life."
"It's all right, Pete."
Mihoshi smiled.
"I forget things easily so I'll probably forget. But I won't forget you. You showed me the dove magic in the park, didn't you? Every time I see park doves I'll surely

remember you."
"Mihoshi-san..."
Pete grew tearful and hurriedly rubbed his eyes with his robe sleeve.
Ayeka watched Zaphiel with a lonely expression.
She was no longer Freya, but Freya's heart wrapped Ayeka.
"Oh Mother Selene."
Ayeka offered a quiet prayer.
"Keep this memory of Heartsease in my heart... Prince Zaphiel, be happy."
She quietly averted her face, and her gaze fell on Tenchi standing in a corner of the great hall.
Tenchi was smiling, watching everyone.
His heart was so full he didn't feel like saying anything.
Beside him, a red-haired girl was smiling the same way.
"Thank you, Tenchi-kun."
The girl floated gently upward.
Kiyone and the others apparently couldn't see her.
But even if they could, everyone was too busy to pay attention to such a small girl.
"Myan!"
The still-enormous Ryo-ohki came over and rubbed against him affectionately.
"I want this child—she's cute. I can't take her, but it's a shame."
The girl stroked Ryo-ohki's head lovingly with hands that had become transparent.
"Farewell. As thanks for saving Heartsease I give you a kiss from Erytheia. One day, a magical gift so that you will be united with the one you love most. Farewell, Tenchi-kun..."
The girl bent and kissed Tenchi's forehead.
For an instant, a golden apple gleamed on his brow.
"You are the conqueror of chaos... forever your name shall be engraved. In the waves, in the moonlight, in the green fields..."
The girl's figure was beginning to fade.
"Chaos!?"
"I am Erytheia. The red daughter... one of the four Dawn Sisters who guard the golden apple..."
For an instant, bright vivid red hair as of the dawn sky swayed—and then disappeared.
Tenchi blinked, and at last slowly bent down, burying his face in Ryo-ohki's warm fur.
"Lord Tenchi."

When Tenchi looked up, Ayeka was standing there with a lonely smile.

"Come now, let us return to our original world."

Liargus was leaning against the throne, staring blankly at the great hall full of couples.

His bones were properly reassembled and he wore his black gown neatly.

"I cannot follow the young prince's ways... but since everyone seems happy, perhaps it shall be deemed satisfactory."

Liargus's fingers tapped a tap-dance tempo on the throne back.

Feet joined in, and thirty-two teeth joined in.

Liargus was dancing tap steps in pure absorption until the prince stared in astonishment and called his name.

"All right—everyone here?"

Washu appeared in the great hall leading Sasami.

"Washu-san? Where on earth did you go?"

"Big Sis! Tenchi-niichan!"

Sasami came running over.

"Somewhere safe."

Washu gave a sharp grin, turned to the adventurers, and clapped her hands briskly.

"Now now, everyone—time to go home. The tea will get cold."

# Ending:

# And So the Adventurers...

"And so the adventurers returned..."

Tenchi slapped shut the thick book.

"Who wrote this? Not Washu-san... was it?"

"Washu-chan."

Washu, who had been munching on nori rice crackers in the Masaki living room, took a sip of tea and smiled.

Ryoko was lying on the beam, unusually lost in thought. Ayeka and Sasami were dozing, leaning together beside Tenchi.

Mihoshi was asleep on the opposite sofa, clutching Ryo-ohki, and Kiyone clutching a floral-print one-piece.

"Of course, it's not me. What wrote it was the Auto Creator System. From one dimension above the normal—the meta-dimension—it was backing up the adventure. I thought if something too terrible came out, I'd have to rewrite it. But it ended with happily ever after, so it should be fine."

"It was terrible enough!"

Tenchi sighed.

"What exactly was I? The title should have been 'The Adventures of Hero Tenchi,' shouldn't it?"

Tenchi tapped the gold lettering on the cover with his finger.

It read: 'The Conqueror of Chaos, or the Seven and One Adventurers.'

"Do you really think so?"

Washu smiled with her mischievous expression.

"Nobody would read Tenchi's boring adventure. Actually, I'm thinking of selling this book through a galactic academy agent. Of course with the software included. Lord Tenchi, how about it? Want to be a spokesperson? The tag line might be... 'Your adventure awaits you' or something."

"Surely you jest."

Tenchi hurriedly waved a hand.
"So—was that all a program? I was worried I really had bugged out somewhere."
"Who knows. Which do you think it was?"
Washu gave a mysterious smile and stood.
"The reset button could have been pressed at any time. If you said you didn't want to play—that is. Yes... Lord Tenchi, all you needed to do was shout once 'I want to go home!'"
Washu surveyed the gathered group, exhausted from the long long adventure and sound asleep.
"But Washu-san."
Tenchi was dumbfounded.
"You never said a single word about that..."
"That's right. If you said that, the adventure would be over."
Washu snapped her fingers and the lab door appeared.
"But Lord Tenchi. The Auto Creator System has no power to create stories. It only takes in living, ever-changing information and sets the environment. The one who created the story—was you."
Washu put her hand on the lab door.
"And—those idle sleepers on the sofa. Truly, seven and one adventurers."
The lab door opened.
"Lord Tenchi, want to come see the system?"
Tenchi thought for a moment and shook his head.
"Later is fine. I'm tired."
Washu smiled and nodded, and closed the door.

"Blasted Washu!!"
A voice came from overhead.
"Making a toy of us is something awful! ...For a game it was pretty heavy."
Ryoko looked down at Tenchi and grinned.
"Tenchi. For a hero, you were pretty pathetic."
"...I know."
Tenchi flopped back heavily onto the sofa.
"I love you, Tenchi."
Ryoko teleported and put her arms around Tenchi's neck.
"Even pathetic is fine. If there's love, the small stuff doesn't matter."
Ryoko kissed Tenchi's cheek with a smack.

# Afterword

This is the 5th volume of "Tenchi," and the first spin-off story.

Kiyone-chan, is always quietly in the background—though maybe 'quietly' isn't the right word, since everything she attempted turned out badly.

This time Kiyone-chan staked everything on her true intelligence and beauty.

But since her partner is Mihoshi, she ended up just as unfortunate as always.

Hmm... is Kiyone, as some people have said, the female version of Tenchi?

And moreover, she's a person who only attracts misfortune, with no bonus whatsoever.

This story is a fantasy setup.

The author, originally a fantasy enthusiast, wanted to try a story like this at least once.

Opening the wardrobe door and there's Narnia, or falling down a rabbit hole into Wonderland—that's, of course, Alice's story.

But this time it might be closer to a fantasy parody.

Fantasy means a hero, a king, a wizard, and a dragon!

Dungeons are dark, the flame of friendship burns hot, and the heroes heroically step over the corpses of monsters to face the final battle, but... hold on, said the story.

After all, since the party members are from the Masaki household, no matter how hard the author tries to set up the fantasy props, the story immediately turns into "Tenchi Muyo!"

Something bad seems to have crossed over...

As the author of a certain horse-raising game, I cannot help but mutter this.

I have no memory of raising characters—well, horses—like these...

And especially, Zaphiel-kun!

They were originally an angel appearing in the Ethiopian "Book of Enoch."

Well, the angel of sudden showers is perhaps a somewhat pitiful existence among the brilliant stars of angels.

And Azrael-kun.

The demon prince from a certain famous RPG, and the demon king who was a

recurring character in "The Black Bird"—both should have been much cooler.
Racing from the ends of time and the far reaches of the universe and from the afterlife—what were you all thinking! the author wants to say. But to all the supporting characters who gathered for this story—it's been a long time.
"Tenchi's" previous stories, and the various games, fantasies, and pure personal interests that this author is obsessively devoted to—all kinds of things crossing together caused the story to be pulled deeper and deeper into the whirlpool of chaos, becoming a swirling mess.
But this time, the author was very happy.
There is simply nothing that can beat the happiness of moving favorite characters through their paces in a world one loves.

Dungeons are dark... and beyond lies ecstasy hand-in-hand with death...
Speaking of dungeons—many of you may think of a certain Wi**ardry, but from the point where we went down the dungeon stairs, what was echoing in the author's head the whole time was the BGM of Du**eon Master.
The author—who loves 3D labyrinths despite a terrible sense of direction just like Mihoshi—needed not a strategy guide or a map, but exactly what was briefly mentioned in the story: the word "Route."
The author, having dedicated this entire summer to the chaos labyrinth, was listening to the insects' chirping and thinking, "Oh no, it's already fall."
Big RPG series installments are being released from fall into winter again... the autumn G1 racing season is starting... ugh, no matter how much time there is, it's never enough.
Even with the Dragon Magazine serialization not yet finished, please forgive the author for thinking only of playing.
Before an exam, games are more fun.
Comics are unbelievably interesting, and TV never grows old no matter how much you watch.
That's just how it is.

May this story bring even brief peace of mind to all of you who are so busy.
Heartsease... peace of mind—the author came upon those words and wrote this afterword with just such feelings.
Just as Mihoshi had Pete's love, and Kiyone had Azrael's devotion, there will come a day when the supporting characters' struggles are rewarded.
Before the protagonists—who have only just set out on an endless journey—surely the

goddess of love robed in the dawn will descend.

Haha (a little embarrassing).

And so, the author thinks with heartfelt feeling: fantasy where you can feel love and adventure without embarrassment is truly wonderful.

This time from Tokyo, in the thick of the autumn G1 racing season.
Naoko Hasegawa